

LIGHTHOUSE OF THE NETHERWORLDS



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Scrawled on the Bookk of the Seaa

We are mere raindrops falling on their vast ocean of history

Ripped page from the Bookk of the Landd

*War bleeds blood from our soldiers, but the innocent suffer the
most: drip by drip, their humanity trickles away, leaving only a
shell of once was*

Sermon taken from the Bookk of the Skyy

*Death is a part of life – we should not fear its shadow. Our
souls lay dormant waiting for death's embrace. Let the winds
carry this child's soul to its final resting place... beyond our
lands... beyond our seas... beyond our skies... in the world
beyond worlds*

Writers, I envy you, for I am but a storyteller

CHAPTER ONE

Eleventh Night

*By compass by day, by stars by night, The Scarlet Lady held true
and sailed into the light.*

— The Bookk of the Seaa

Rachel's screams fell silent. As icy water ran down her throat and into her lungs, bony hands as cold as frost began pulling her downwards. The numbing cold dulled her senses, but she felt a sharp pain above her left temple, and a bright blue light blinded her.

The distant light then dwindled, illuminating the scores of decimated carcasses that twitched violently in their final death throes. As the carcasses' putrefied flesh crystallised, they drifted down into the depths of the obsidian ocean, leaving eerie trails of their morbid remains behind.

Rachel's eyes grew cold. As the tarry water suffocated her lungs, the disturbing dream drowned with her, and she awoke with a start.

Breathlessly, she squinted through leaden eyelids, but the pink walls of her bedroom gave her no comfort. Her piercing green eyes stared up at the pink polka-dotted ceiling with dread, but they turned towards the porthole window, and as her sweaty alabaster hands twisted the duvet cover, she felt the familiar knot in her stomach and the pain it brought.

'Please, not again,' she pleaded, recoiling as she endured the searing agony as it ripped through her body, but the pain soon vanished, and her blanched fingers wiped the warm teardrops that had trickled down her cheeks. Impassively, she watched the morning sun as it kissed the misty horizon. Nestled in the dewy porthole windowpane, the moon's wilting umbra evaporated into the ether, and another fresh dawn broke forth.

Rachel took a deep breath and relished the warmth upon her face, but her respite didn't last long. Over to her left, an overbearing whirring noise assailed her eardrums. In utter panic, she rolled over and glared daggers at the battered brass clock that squatted on her bedside cabinet.

Astride the mechanical clock, twin bells quivered with anticipation. The clock's poorly drawn face grinned devilishly back at her, and its boisterous bells rang out with gusto.

'I'm awake – I'm awake,' she snapped, glowering at the cheerful clock, whose excessive pealing ended with a firm and decisive whack.

Rachel waited for the clock's minute hand to move – but it sulked. As six o' clock hadn't marched on, she rubbed her drowsy bloodshot eyes.

Slowly, but surely, the September sunshine burned the dew off the windowpane, and stark shadows crept across her messy bedroom floor.

Rachel gazed bleary-eyed at the wonky wooden walls, whose fitted wardrobe, fitted chest of drawers, fitted dressing table and fitted bunk bed came with the willow treehouse whether she wanted them or not.

With a lingering sigh, she stared at her father's woeful attempt at decorating her bedroom. Her freshly painted bedroom still smelt of something most peculiar; and sprouting along the skirting board, a furry blanket of green moss spread along the warped woodwork.

DRIP! DRIP! DRIP!

Heavy water droplets fell noisily from the ceiling.

Rachel craned her neck and stared at the five plastic buckets that surrounded her bunk bed. They were almost full to overflowing with the woodsy waters from the attic above (and her father *still* hadn't found the root of the problem), but she didn't mind the dripping water because the tap-tap-tapping sound never failed to lull her into the Land of Nod.

However, the same recurring nightmare had put an end to her usual uninterrupted slumber, and after enduring eleven nights of unbridled terror, she had misgivings about moving into a new home in a new town.

Rachel now resided in a blustery cul-de-sac, high up on the outskirts of an insignificant seaside town called Lower-Inkcome-by-the-sea.

Her father had put on a brave face and only complained about the house on one occasion: last Sunday morning, the house creaked and groaned as a gale-force wind had suddenly whipped up from the north and pounded their property. He had poked his head over his dog-eared newspaper and peered beyond the rattling windows at the wild ocean waves and told her the house was getting on in years, and it's probably got a bad bout of rheumatism perched on top of the cliff in all weathers.

Rachel felt the sudden draft of cold air whistling under her bedroom door, and after another nightmare and lack of sleep, she felt groggy, ill-tempered, and her pink pyjamas were soaked with sticky sweat, so she really needed to get up, take a shower and put some fresh clothes on. However, her ruminative thoughts came to an untidy end: muffled noises seeped through the festooned-knotted floorboards; her parents were awake and on the move. Without a moment's hesitation, she delved into the plethora of pink pillows and slumped against the mattress.

With the thickest and longest pillow wrapped around her ears, she waited for her parents' dawn chorus.

'I CAN'T FIND MY CLEAN UNDERPANTS,' bellowed her father irately, sounding a bit miffed. 'I'M SURE I PACKED THEM AWAY LAST NIGHT.'

'I HAD TO MOVE THEM,' shouted her mother huffily. 'NOW, LOOK UNDER THE FOOT OF THE BED. THE BOXES ARE CLEARLY LABELED, AND BEFORE YOU ASK – YOUR SOCKS ARE ON THE WASHING LINE...'

Her parents' banter ended abruptly with a clattering of cutlery and a clangouring of cups. Her mother yelled up the spiral staircase and asked in a rushed but heated tone, '*Rachel – what do you want for breakfast?*'

Rachel didn't answer. She didn't want to think about food at this ungodly hour, and over the past few days, her appetite had slowly waned. Only the other day, she had just nibbled on her father's freshly made homemade muffins, throwing the spongy remains and slices of tangy fruit over the fence and into the next-door neighbour's dog bowl.

Ignoring the butterflies in her stomach, she puffed up her pillows and glanced at the bedside table. Her most treasured family photograph stood beside the chided clock. Rachel recalled that wintry morning with crystal clarity and shivered as she immersed herself in that memory.

* * *

Rachel never knew winter could be so cold and bitter.

The Boxing Day church service seemed to go on forever, but during his rhetoric, the vicar thanked her parents for their generous donation towards the ailing church roof. With their last hymn still ringing in their ears, the choir led the stampede out of the church, but with a little more decorum, the vicar followed them out into the snow-laden graveyard. With chapped lips, dripping noses and red-tipped ears, the freezing cold choir huddled together like penguins as they thanked the parishioners who had braved the inclement weather to come to church.

Rachel couldn't wait to get home and in front of the coal fire, but just as her father struggled to close the church's black wooden gate, someone shouted, '*Oh, Mr and Mrs Cook – a moment if you please.*'

Using his gnarled walking stick, the elderly vicar motioned them over to the calcified steps of a crumbling ivy-matted mausoleum. There was no escaping his demands: they were having their photograph taken for the next issue of *The Sign of the Times* – the church's local newsletter. His antiquated camera had seen better days, but he assured them it was in perfect working order and disappeared beneath the blackened shroud.

Rachel stamped her chilblain feet and blew on her chapped hands, choosing to ignore the vicar's cheerful request to smile and say, 'Cheese!'

* * *

Leaving the blinding flash and her reverie behind, she gave the snowy snapshot a final glance. Grinning wildly out of the picture, her father, Paul, appeared as pleased as punch; however, her mother, Lorraine, seemed somewhat distracted as he squeezed her hourglass waist.

Turning forty a few weeks ago, her mother looked as glamorous as ever. Her porcelain complexion, high cheekbones and dark black hair had helped her to win numerous beauty pageants, or so her father had told her with a twinkle in his dewy eyes. Inheriting none of her mother's traits, she hoped she would at least ascend to her mother's lofty heights.

On the other hand, her father's thick black toupee barely reached up to her mother's neck – even on tiptoes. Pushing fifty, his morbid lack of exercise fuelled his expanding girth, and his taste testing at the baking factory wasn't helping his weight, either. Only his job, the pub and a game of golf lured him out of the house.

Rachel's heart skipped a beat. The sharp rap against the bedroom door and her mother's strangled voice shattered the slumbering silence – muddling her memories.

'IT'S TIME TO GET UP, YOUNG LADY,' Lorraine hollered.

At first, she wanted to ignore her mother's outlandish suggestion, but she bellowed irascibly, 'I DON'T WANT TO GO TO SCHOOL.'

Thumping footsteps came to a thudding halt; she heard her father whispering heavily to her mother. As the hushed tones petered away, the bedroom's starfish doorknob began to move, but it turned no more as her mother said soothingly, 'I know it's going to be strange going to a new school, Rachel, but you'll make new friends in no time – you'll see.'

'*And new enemies,*' muttered Rachel, so softly even the mouse living behind the skirting board wouldn't have heard her cutting remark.

'I've already spoken to the headmaster about your previous school,' added Paul in a placatory tone. 'He's going to keep a watchful eye out for you in the coming months – you know – until you're settled in.'

Rachel took a deep breath and let out a resigned sigh. 'Well, I'll need a strong cup of tea to start the day,' she told them, easing the tension, knowing full well her parents were only doing their best considering

their dire financial situation. 'OK, maybe a couple of hard-boiled eggs,' she added spritely, finally giving into to her hunger pangs.

'I'll put the kettle on,' Paul announced.

'And I'll make you a couple of slices of jammy buttered toast,' added Lorraine hotly. 'You'll need to keep your strength up this morning.'

As her parents rushed down the staircase, she closed her sullen eyes and tried hard not to think about the past few months, but she caved in.

* * *

Rachel used to live high above the market town of Upper Inkcome at number eighteen, Princes Drive. The town wasn't *on*, *by* or anywhere *near* the sea (for the residents of Upper Inkcome that would have been unthinkable), and even its freshwater lake and dam remained hidden amongst acres of checkerboard pastures and endless rolling hills.

Her parents never took her to see the vast lake, as they soon found out that if they took her anywhere near the sea or any body of water, she would wail and scream at the top of her lungs.

Every Sunday night, they would try to bathe her in a few inches of tepid water, but she would pitch a fit, soaking them as she thrashed about, desperate to get out of the tub. However, as the years passed, her morbid fear of water slowly evaporated away.

Rachel thought about the ornate turtle-shell bathtub in her old home, and by the time she had turned six, it had one other use than getting her squeaky-clean: if she stood on tiptoes between its flipper-shaped taps, she could see through the stained-glass window, hoping for a glimpse of her father's portly silhouette on the eighteenth hole.

Her parents' house overlooked the town's exclusive luxurious golf course, where her father *used* to spend most Saturday mornings in preference to going shopping with her mother. His unhealthy obsession with the sport had cost him dearly. Almost a year to the day, he had slunk off work to play golf with Todd Jenkins, his equally sports-mad golfing workmate, who scoffed mockingly at the weather forecaster's repeated warning of heavy thunderstorms due that very afternoon.

Her father, however, almost died on the eighteenth hole, as his stroke of luck in getting a hole in one had quickly turned to misfortune. As he ran around in circles whooping and waving his long iron high above his head, a flash and then a deafening crack had put an end to his jubilation.

An hour later and slightly singed – but very much alive – her father lay on a hospital gurney, the left cuff on his discarded blackened shirt beside him, still smouldering as she gave him a tearful embrace. He had survived the lightning bolt, but his molten long iron had landed on the golf clubhouse roof, setting it alight – burning it to the ground.

The next day, a steady stream of well-wishers lined up to see her father in his hospital bed, including a Mr Jinks, an insurance assessor, who didn't wish him well at all. In fact, Mr Jinks told her father he wasn't welcome back at the golf club, whose clubhouse had relocated into one of the spare rooms above *The Golden Toad*, her father's local pub, and adding to his other woes, Mr Jinks had him banned from there as well.

In her new house, the plain bathroom window faced north and the ocean beyond. Rachel wasn't thrilled about the aquatic view through the porthole window, but at least she wouldn't have to see the charred remains of the golf clubhouse, a constant reminder of the day she nearly lost her father. Here she went again, thinking about days gone by. Her late grandmother had often told her, '*The past is past – don't dwell on it.*'

A veil of sadness threatened to overwhelm her, and she fought back the tears as she thought about her grandmother, who had suddenly passed away in her sleep earlier that year. Rachel had lost a dear friend and a confidante that day, and she missed their heart to heart. On Sunday afternoons – and with an overloaded tea tray in hand – the pair of them would retire to the drawing room, well out of earshot from her parents.

Rachel would often talk about her gift: her grandmother seemed to be the only one who understood that (sometimes) her uncanny gift of recall wasn't a blessing – but a curse.

Rachel could remember her very first birthday party as if it were yesterday. Her party had started out with balloon animals and babies bouncing on mothers' knees, but *Cecil the Clown* had caught his laces in his bulbous boots. His unfortunate trip had sent him sailing headfirst into her pink birthday cake and surfing across the table, cutting through the spread of sandwiches and the plastic tumblers full of fizzy drinks.

With his painted face covered in icing powder, his frizzy ginger hair matted with strawberry jelly, a lighted candle up one nostril and a candy cane up the other, he had frightened the children and made them cry.

Now almost ten years on, she thought about the Wednesday that had changed everything. Her troubled mind thought about that strange day, and those fluid memories came flooding back.

CHAPTER TWO

Warty Wednesday

An unwelcoming Spanish plume had spread swiftly across the country. The population of Upper Inkcome sweltered in the hot and humid air.

Rachel's ceiling fan creaked but mostly squeaked, almost giving up the ghost as it struggled to keep going. Her bedroom windows were wide open, but the muggy stagnant air kept her dozing in and out of slumber until she heard whistling and the town hall clock chiming four times.

On hearing the clinking of bottles, she buried her sweaty head into her damp pillows as Gussy Grimshaw, her unseen milkman, went about his cheery business of delivering bottles of fresh milk from door to door, whistling merrily away to himself without a care in the world. Rachel waited impatiently for his electric milk float to squeal out of the road.

With her teeth still on edge, she winced in pain and fumbled for the light switch. Almost awake, she stared down at her left hand: an outcrop of unsightly warts had sprouted across her palm. At that moment, a cool, sweet-smelling breeze blew steadily in through the window, and her warty pain lessened, and she slowly drifted off into a deep, restful sleep...

* * *

Later that morning, her mother took her to see their family doctor. Doctor Butterworth's blotchy bespectacled face inspected every square inch of her left hand. He reached for a pen and tapped the well-chewed plastic cap against his yellow-stained teeth. He *ummed* and *aahed* as he stared up at the peeling ceiling, but he eventually grabbed a bit of paper and wrote an unintelligible runny scrawl on its crinkled surface.

With the saliva-stained prescription in her hand, Rachel trotted after her mother as she headed purposely towards the hustle and bustle of the Carrefour farmers' market – popping into the chemists along the way.

Their first port of call should have been Bumble's Beehive stall, but Mrs Cutler saw the pair of them through her shop window. Irene Cutler, a jeweller by trade, tapped against the glass and beckoned them into her shop. In celebration of her impending wedding anniversary, Lorraine had asked Irene to reset her ornate wedding ring with an even bigger and more ostentatious diamond.

In a weary voice, Irene said, for some reason, she had risen at four o'clock that morning and decided to finish the ring. Stifling a yawn with

the back of her hand, she placed the plush velvet case into Lorraine's willing palm and gave her a tired but warm smile.

(Rachel chuckled inwardly and wondered if her father would notice that his joint bank account had taken an unexpected turn for the worse.)

As Lorraine chatted to Irene about her tenth wedding anniversary, Rachel perused the countless aisles of jewellery and thought about the marquee that had arrived that morning – waking her up at five o'clock. As she had left the house, the humongous white tent rose like twin steeples, towering above their landscaped garden for the entire town to see. To all appearances, it looked like the circus was in town, but she cast that silly thought aside, knowing full well that she couldn't recall the circus *ever* coming to Upper Inkcome.

With the wedding ring back in its velvet case, Lorraine asked Rachel if she would keep it safe (and with a mischievous look in her eye, she told her, 'I very much doubt anyone's going to think there's anything worth stealing in your raggedy backpack.')

With a small fortune on her back, she traipsed after her mother.

* * *

Rachel hadn't seen so many shoppers in the farmers' market before. Only the annual carnival drew *this* many people into town. Now, surely, Ms Harlequin, the town's reigning busybody and long-term spinster, would have told her mother of *any* important events that were going on in Upper Inkcome. Ms Vivian Harlequin seemed to know other peoples' business even before they did.

Hot on her mother's heels, she weaved her way through the throng of shoppers who were milling about like ants.

The queue outside Bumble's Beehive stall dribbled along at a snail's pace. On a bright, sunny day such as this, the glistening yellow facade of Bumble's Beehive stall shone like a beacon. Atop its reinforced roof, a huge sign advertised the most popular wares available to purchase and directly above it, a couple of mechanical bees crawled tirelessly back and forth – buzzing as they went about their business.

Rachel glanced behind her. The backend of Bumble's queue snaked its way around *The Chilly Cornet* ice cream van. With the sun breaking out from the clouds, Fabio Faramundo wasted no time in capitalising on his good fortune. His customers cursed under their breath and dug deep into

their pockets, as he had just put his ice cream prices up. In fact, Fabio's customers always paid over the top for his ice cream, and his homemade Cornish wafer creams were the talk of the town. The competition was fierce, and the stalls fought tooth and nail for every customer, luring the unwary and the gullible into their greedy clutches.

However, one such stall faced closure due to lacklustre sales, but Bill and Bella Bumble had turned their business around by handing out free candyflosses. The intoxicating sweet honey candyfloss brought many a customer back to their stall.

Rachel eyed the numerous jars of dripping honeycomb longingly. (Bumble's homemade honey always took centre stage on the Cook's bustling breakfast table.) Her mother shuffled closer to the stall and let out a disheartening groan. Rachel grinned as Ms Harlequin's keen eyes had her mother in her sights. Vivian barged through the crowd and took Lorraine's arm, drawing her close as she unleashed her latest gossip.

Rachel's eyes wandered. Everyone around her seemed to have places to go and people to see – well, all apart from the man and boy who were leaning against Growler's hot dog van, chewing on their invisible grub.

Not quite believing the spectacle in front of her, she narrowed her eyes and focused on their food, which, to the naked eye, wasn't there at all. Nevertheless, the trilby-hatted man carried on regardless as did his young dining companion. They munched on the air and stared straight ahead, occasionally pointing at something or someone in the crowd.

(Bobby Growler hadn't taken a blind bit of notice of his bizarre customers as he bellowed at the radio as if his losing football team could actually hear his ranting about their utter lack of skill and their feckless manager. Distracted from the task in hand, the smouldering cigarette on his lower lip fell into the frying pan, and his sausages began to blacken and sizzle as the ash and white stub mingled with the greasy fat.)

Rachel had only one thing on her mind and pondered the question: *who were these peculiar munching patrons?*

However, that thought ended abruptly as her eyes grew as wide as saucers, and she gulped as the trilby-hatted man now stared at her. He had caught her gawping at them – gawping at their bizarre behaviour, but that moment came and went. The trilby-hatted man averted his gaze and spoke to the boy. In unison, they turned their backs on her, and their long shadowy bodies vanished all at once.

Rachel blinked, and she blinked again, but it was no use. '*How the devil did they do that?*' she said under her breath then someone sniggered.

'You know – talking to oneself is a sign of madness,' a squeaky voice chuckled. 'Well, unless you're talking to the daisies?'

Taken by surprise, she spun around and peered at the person whose camouflaged face lay behind a curtain of yellow candyflosses.

'Hiya, Rachel – I haven't seen those pale legs of yours in quite a while,' smirked the young boy who offered her a candyfloss, unable to brush his spiky blond hair out of his eyes as it bobbed about in the breeze.

Rachel accepted his candyfloss and gave him a suitable reply. 'Like the rest of my body, Stew – my legs have been stuck indoors for the past week,' she retorted. 'I've been given stacks of homework to do over the holiday,' she added gloomily and chomped down on her candyfloss.

'Well, I s'ppose we're pretty lucky at Gravelings. The teachers rarely hand out homework over the holidays,' gloated Stewart gleefully, his angular face sandwiched between his two remaining candyflosses.

Rachel fixed Stewart with a beady stare. 'No wonder you were always getting into trouble – you've got too much time on your hands,' she said.

However, he knew her all too well and gave her a playful grin. 'Trouble's my middle name,' Stewart told her with a smouldering smirk, but a smile raced across his face. 'Anyway, if I hadn't stolen those apples that day, we wouldn't have crossed paths.'

Rachel beamed and said warmly, 'It's our anniversary this Friday. Perhaps my dad will bake us an apple pie to celebrate?'

They both chuckled and chatted about the day in question.

* * *

Bored with nothing to do that day, Stewart had decided to go scrumping for apples. Unfortunately, he had picked the wrong place and time to steal them: her father had caught him red-handed in his orchard.

Stewart's trouser, coat pockets and jacket were so full to bursting with Bramley apples, he had tried but failed to make his wobbly escape.

Taking pity on the boy, Rachel had lied to her father and told him the boy was, in fact, a friend, and she had asked him around for dinner.

With nothing to lose, Stewart went along with her blatant white lie – and the offer of free food.

With delicious dinner smells wafting up his nose, Stewart had called his mother and told her where he was and not to worry. He had sat down at the dining table and marvelled at the spread of food in front of him.

Minding his p's and q's, he had made polite conversation and nodded for most of the meal because he was quite busy with the chore of chewing and savouring every bite of the delicious homemade food.

At the end of the meal and almost filled to the gills, Stewart gave Rachel a satisfied grin and helped himself to a slice of homemade apple pie – and doing his utmost to ignore her father's overly suspicious gaze.

Feeling even more stuffed than the turkey he had just eaten, Stewart joined the Cooks as they sat down in their crystal-covered conservatory.

With full stomachs, they made the most of the Indian summer and made small talk as the sun went down.

In the diminishing light, Stewart felt at ease with the Cooks and told them about his family – and the fishing tragedy that had killed his father. His mother, Polly Pickling, wanted to move as far away as possible from the coast and the ocean that had taken her husband's life. Polly's parents, Billy and Bella Bumble, had asked them to come and stay with them in Upper Inkcome. Polly went willingly because she never wanted to see *that* ocean and *that* town ever again.

And after that day in the orchard, Rachel and Stewart became the firmest of friends (kindred spirits Stewart's sister had told them).

* * *

'Where's Sally?' Rachel asked Stewart, thinking about his twin sister.

A shadow of worry quickly spread across his face, but he squared his shoulders and said, '*Sally's ill in bed.*'

Rachel didn't like the sound of that at all: Sally didn't get sick; the measles and the chickenpox avoided her like the plague – and even the common cold kept its distance.

'Mum's beside herself,' Stewart added.

'Is Sally going to be all right?' Rachel asked.

Stewart sniffed. 'We don't know. At first, we thought Sis had the flu – but now the doctor *thinks* it could be meningitis!' he told her.

'Look, Stew, if there's anything I can do –' Rachel began, but she felt a comforting hand rest upon her shoulder.

Bella Bumble placed her other hand on her grandson's shoulder. Her pale blue eyes appeared older than the waterfall of frizzled grey hair that draped down over her sagging shoulders.

'That's very kind of you, my dear, but she's in good hands,' Bella said. 'Stewart, your mother told me she's consulted another doctor.'

Stewart hadn't hidden his look of concern on hearing the unexpected news and folded his arms disapprovingly. 'And what do we know about this *so-called* doctor, eh?' he pressed her, his voice thick with suspicion because he didn't want any old quack visiting his sister.

'The doctor comes highly recommended,' Bella smiled.

'Recommended by whom?' Stewart demanded at once.

'Recommended by you – silly,' beamed Bella, giving his shoulder an affectionate squeeze. 'I know it's been a while, Stewart – but surely you haven't forgotten Doctor Foster already?'

On hearing the doctor's name, Stewart spluttered, 'S-she's – s-she's coming here – to Upper Inkcome? I – I don't believe it – s-she's *actually* stepped foot outside the surgery?'

'Doctor Foster called and said she would be here within the hour. I do hope Fidelia can remember the way – and how to drive a car –' Bella began, but she fell deathly silent and stared wide-eyed at Stewart.

Rachel felt an icy cold shiver run down her spine; the tips of her toes tingled, and she peered down at her buckled shoes as they jingled.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The sonic boom shook the half-eaten candyfloss out of her hand and onto the ground. Stuck fast to the well-trodden grass, her candyfloss wobbled from side to side as another thunderous boom sounded out.

The ground beneath her feet rumbled from the sudden aftershock.

Billowing out from behind Bumble's Beehive stall, a plume of pinkish smoke rose high into the sky – startling the seagulls overhead as well as everyone on the ground.

'STEWART!' bellowed a decidedly frustrated and irritated voice. 'THE CONFOUNDED MACHINE'S GONE WRONG – AGAIN!'

Stewart gave Rachel a rueful smile. He turned around and faced his beleaguered grandfather, Bill, and shouted, 'COMING, GRAMPS.'

With beads of sweat glistening on his brow, Bill mopped them away with a yellowing threadbare cloth and beckoned Stewart over.

'What's going on, Stew?' asked Rachel heatedly.

'The candyfloss machine's been on the blink all week,' he huffed exasperatedly. 'Speak to you later, Rachel – duty calls,' he added and thrust his remaining candyflosses into the hands of the elderly couple behind him and rushed full pelt towards the rear of the stall.

Both young and old watched in trepidation as the smoke swirled and spiralled upwards. The smoke thickened and turned a nasty shade of sanguine – sparkling and rolling as it rose higher into the cloudless sky.

Suddenly, from out of the blue, came an unimaginable grinding sound that pounded everyone's ears into submission.

Rachel threw her hands over her head, and as she felt the ringing in her ears couldn't get any worse, the ear-splitting noise ended with a tremendous bang and then silence. An unnerving calm fell upon the crowds, but they soon began chatting amongst themselves.

Bella let out a sigh of desperation and looked ready to burst into tears.

Rachel had seen the flash of fear that had cut across her face: without the scrummy candyfloss to draw the customers in, Bumble's Beehive stall would probably have to shut up shop for good.

Tearing herself away from Vivian, Lorraine dashed towards Bella.

'I'm sure Stewart will be able to fix the candyfloss machine,' Lorraine told Bella reassuringly. 'Your grandson mended our squeaky settee, our leaky shower – and all before the canapés were on the dining table.'

A grin inched its way across Bella's face, and with a smile, she said, 'Stewart takes after his father. They were like two peas in a pod, always covered in grease and tinkering with something or another. I guess some people are just gifted when it comes to fixing things.'

Rachel gave her mother such a smirk it could have melted cheese at twenty paces. When it came to household maintenance, she knew her father hadn't the wherewithal to fix even the basic faults – no matter how small. His last encounter with something electrical hadn't gone down too well. Mending the plug on the toaster had resulted in sending a couple of slices of burnt bread into orbit around the kitchen ceiling fan.

Her father's mishaps were legendary: a week ago, he had nearly set the house on fire, as one of his baking experiments had gone awry.

With his steaming fruit and nut cake fit to explode, he had ducked for cover as it had shot through the oven door and out of the open kitchen window, missing the postman's head before landing in a bed of tulips.

DING! DING!

'Next customer please,' Bill called out from the confines of his stall, putting the small hammer over to one side as the ship's bell reverberated above his head. He looked over at Rachel and her mother and beckoned them over, giving his wife a wink and a nod.

'I better see how Stewart's getting on around the back,' said Bella and bade them farewell, lifted up her long skirt and scuttled away.

Lorraine, however, had barely taken a step forward, when a woman's voice trilled, *'Oh, Lorraine – I'm so glad I've caught up with you – Mrs Cutler said you would be down in this neck of the woods.'*

Rachel recognised the annoying shrill voice. Her mother's long-term and long-suffering secretary, Ms Flora Dandelion, had an uncanny knack of tracking her mother down – wherever she was. Sweating profusely, Flora, a somewhat heavyset woman wearing an oversized oval hat and bright billowing dress, pushed her way through the burgeoning crowds.

With some difficulty, she wheezed her way around an elderly couple and their overweight white bulldog that had just licked a candyfloss stick clean; the dog sniffed the air and immediately pounced on a melting ice-cream cone, growling at her as she ventured near its slushy food.

'W-what a d-day – what a d-day,' Flora puffed.

'Good morning, Flora – whatever's the matter?' asked Lorraine unsympathetically, waiting impatiently as the woman caught her breath.

'W-we need to t-talk about the f-flower arrangements,' she replied.

DING! DING!

'I'm not getting any younger,' Bill rumbled as he stretched out his aching spine, *'and neither is my back or the crick in my neck!'*

'I'll go and get the honey, Mum,' Rachel said, and without waiting for her mother's reply, she ran over and met Bill's smile with one of her own. 'Sorry about that, Mr Bumble – but Mum's been bumping into just about everyone this morning.'

'I bet Flora wished she hadn't,' he chuckled on hearing Lorraine's vociferous voice, her rising temper near to breaking point. 'And please call me Bill – let's have none of that formal nonsense, eh?' he added light-heartedly and wrenched a wad of crumpled newspapers from a stack that swayed dangerously by his side.

Rachel beamed and said in a pompous voice, *'I must conduct myself in a manner that upholds the values and standards of my school. I will treat my peers with reverence and give them the respect that they deserve...'*

With her head held even higher it hurt, she continued with her high and mighty condescending voice, *'Within the boundaries of the school or outside its hallowed walls, good manners must be adhered to at all times. Pupils must follow by example and always act in accordance with the school's rules. Our Prefects epitomise this most sacred creed and always strive to exceed it.'*

Bill blew a low whistle through the gap in his smoke-stained teeth. 'That's a pretty good impression of your headmistress,' he told her, 'but next time, might I suggest you stick a plum in your mouth –'

'YOU HAVEN'T BOOKED THE CONCERT BAND – THEY SHOULD HAVE BEEN BOOKED WEEKS AGO...'

The ship's bell above Bill's head hummed.

Lorraine's disgruntled voice bellowed out again, 'AND WHAT DO YOU MEAN THE VICAR'S BEEN DOUBLE BOOKED?'

'Looks like my parents' wedding anniversary has hit another snag,' said Rachel glumly. 'I'll be glad when its all over and done with –'

Hisssssssssssssssssss!

A black lumpish cat leapt onto the countertop with a heavy thud.

'Oh, not you again,' Bill blustered, shooing the cat away with his tattooed hands. 'Scram you feline fiend.'

The cat hissed again; its fiery green pulsating eyes darted everywhere and at everything. It spun around and raced up and down the countertop, sniffing the air, dodging Bill's every attempt to knock it back towards the ground, but then the cat froze and let out a triumphant meow as it twitched its puffy tail. It leapt onto the top of the towering column of newspapers, crouched down and ripped them to shreds with its claws.

'*It's gone bonkers,*' barked Bill inconsolably, who spun around and threw open the doors to a tall cupboard that was sandwiched between the shelves of honey jars. The cat's manic behaviour sent scraps of paper high into the stall. 'Ah, ha – this will sort you out,' he added furiously, brandishing the broom at the cat that had gone most peculiar.

'Don't hurt it, Bill,' Rachel implored.

'Careful, Rachel – It's probably got rabies,' he replied warningly, jabbing the broom closer to the cat's head. 'Now, scat you stray.'

With the fear of violence only a couple of inches away, the cat slowly backed away from him, but all of a sudden, it twitched its tail, raised its claw and cut the twine. With a rate of knots, it sped down the column of newspapers and hit the floor with such force, it staggered sideways and careered into a wooden shelf. The cat let out a cry then rushed through Bill's legs, threw itself against the back door and scampered away.

'*And don't come back!*' Bill snarled, slamming the back door shut.

'LOOK OUT!' Rachel shouted, but her warning came far too late as the column of newspapers toppled over. Bill twisted to one side, managing to dodge the wayward wads of papers as they came crashing down, but one of them had a mind of its own and hit him squarely in the face.

'*Are you all right, Bill?*' Rachel shrieked.

He let out a half-hearted laugh and said mockingly, 'Only me pride.'

'That cat's made a right mess of your stall,' said Rachel lugubriously. 'I'll come around and help you clean up,' she added, and by the time Bill had struggled to his feet, she had already vanished.

'SORRY ABOUT THE DELAY, FOLKS – JUST GIVE ME TEN MINUTES TO CLEAN THIS MESS UP,' Bill shouted out to his customers who were waiting in line, however, angry murmurings and mutterings quickly rippled down the queue, voicing their annoyance at the untimely delay.

Rachel grinned as she saw Stewart's legs sticking out from under the broken candyfloss machine. He wasn't having any luck; she could hear him cursing as she struggled to open the obstinate back door of the stall. With one almighty tug, she managed to wrench the back door open. Already hard at work sweeping up the shredded newspaper, Bill ushered her inside, and she gently shut the door behind her.

Rachel spotted the honey jars that the cat had toppled over. 'I'll sort the honey jars out,' she informed Bill, and without uttering another word, she knelt down and inspected every jar, making doubly sure they hadn't leaked, but as she put them back on the shelves, she saw a faint glimmer of light through the gloom.

Rachel peered beyond the honey jars. The thick covering of dust, spindly spider webs and just plain grot, almost obscured her view of the back of the shelves, and so with nothing apparently visible through the mire of murky threads, she went to stand up, but the faint ghostly blue light caught her attention again, and she readily knelt back down again.

Intrigued by the barely perceptible glow, she took the plunge and stuck her hand into the back of the shelves. However, it wasn't any good, as her slim fingers were still miles away from the curious light. Rachel wasn't the type to give up that easily, so she quickly snatched one of the newspapers that had hit Bill, rolled it up and tried once more.

Little by little, she tapped the curious object towards her. It glowed brighter with every tap until it was finally within her grasp; reaching in, she closed her fingers around the now radiant object. At first, a slight tingling sensation crept through her fingers, but that feeling gave way to fear as the throbbing sensation shot up her arm that made her grip the object so hard, she thought her fingers would snap and shatter.

Yanking her left hand and the oval object out into the shadowy light, the frightful feeling vanished, and she tried to let go of the rolled-up newspaper in her right, but the cloying cobwebs and globulus goo held it fast. In sheer desperation, she whacked the newspaper against the floor

so hard it stayed put, pinned down by copious amounts of cat hair and something very sticky indeed.

Rachel studied the object in her hand and marvelled at its cerulean colour. The outer rim of the glass crystal glistened and appeared razor-sharp, but as she brushed her fingers lightly across its splintered shards, they felt as blunt as safety scissors.

The bluish glow that had attracted her to the crystal in the first place had waned, so she quickly shook it like a snow globe. To her delight, it glowed once more, and she smelt the sweet aroma of honey. Oozing out from the cork stopper, a trickle of runny honey ran down her fingers.

‘What have you got there, Rachel?’ asked Bill, his interest apparent.

‘It’s a crystal honey jar,’ she replied, fascinated by the striations of blueish nectar that spread out from the crystal’s glowing core.

Bill leant over her with intense curiosity.

‘I found it at the back of the alcove,’ she added excitedly, licked her sticky fingers, rose to her feet and almost fell back down again, as an intense rush of blood had made her feel quite dizzy and definitely woozy.

‘You all right, Rachel?’

‘I think so,’ she said, still dazed but grateful her sudden dizzy spell had all but disappeared. ‘I must have gotten up off the floor too quickly.’

‘Well, bless my soul,’ Bill expounded, staring at the crystal honey jar in her hand. ‘You’ve found our missing wedding gift.’

Rachel beamed. ‘It’s leaking a bit,’ she replied.

‘I wonder how it got in here,’ Bill postulated, scratching his head, deep in thought. ‘We thought it had been stolen.’

‘Who’s the prezzy from?’ Rachel quizzed him.

Bill pursed his lips. ‘Dunno,’ he replied, still flummoxed at her direct question as she handed over his lost property. ‘We found the jar amongst the other wedding presents with an oddly-written letter wrapped around it,’ he added with a mysterious undertone, pressing down on the crystal honey jar’s stopper with his thumb to seal the leak.

‘What did it say?’ asked Rachel keenly.

‘Now, let me think – my brain’s getting a little addled of late... ah, yes – something about the *Remorrah* and *The Fate of The Scarlet Lady*.’

Rachel’s eyes widened and a lump formed in her throat; she felt a peculiar sense of unease on hearing his spoken words.

Bill’s eyes blazed. ‘You’ve heard those words before – haven’t you, Rachel?’ he added with gritty inquisitiveness.

Rachel swallowed. ‘Yes – yes, I have,’ she said at last.

‘So, what’s the story, Rachel – I’m all ears?’

Rachel cleared her throat and said, ‘Granny decided to have a spring clean, so she sent Dad into her attic to have a tidy up. He was about to come back down the ladder when he stepped on a loose floorboard. As he went to put the floorboard back, he spotted something tucked right up against the eaves and pulled out a hexagonal book that smelt of seaweed.

With my eyes closed, he asked me to pick one of the tales from the book. Dad had barely finished reading the first chapter when Granny walked in with the tea and saw the *Bookk of the Seaa* in his hands.

I’ve never seen her so upset and angry before. She slammed the tea tray down on the table in a fit of rage, snatched the book away from him and ran upstairs in tears. We said we were sorry and tried to comfort her, but she told us to go and to leave her alone. She never spoke about that day and her odd outburst and carried on as if nothing had happened.’

‘And what about *The Fate of The Scarlet Lady*?’ Bill asked, plonking his derriere down on a stool. ‘Now that you’ve gone and gotten me interested – d’you think you can remember that bit of the tale?’

With a bashful smile, Rachel nodded that she did and said, ‘And as you’re sitting comfortably – I’ll begin...

The Fate of The Scarlet Lady

The terrible tempest night lashed out at the moon, but the languishing light shone on those wretched souls. Only the brave and foolish would dare to stare at the heart of the storm that engulfed them. The ships’ wooden hulls buckled and split, but kept the icy seawater at bay. As the ice grew thicker, the pounding noise rose above the squall of the storm, fuelling the frenzy of fear amongst those at sea.

The Scarlet Lady lumbered out of the swell and into the eye of the storm. The other ships sailed aft, leaving the drifting ship to its fate. The Scarlet Lady’s crew followed their captain onto the deck and lowered their heads in reverence. They fell to their knees, clutched their hands together and prayed for clemency.

The captain stood his ground, showing no earthly emotion as the terrifying screams drifted across the accursed ocean. As an icy blue glow fell across his craggy face, a single teardrop fell unashamedly down his left cheek. The ship’s cat rubbed against his shin as if to comfort him, but the unbidden fate that bound him preyed heavily on his mind.’

'Well, there's a tall tale, which would give even the hardiest of seamen nightmares,' said Bill mirthfully on hearing her morbid story.

'There was something even scarier inside the front cover,' Rachel told him. 'Dad sniffed the red ink and said it was blood – but I'm pretty sure he was joking.'

'What did it say?' asked Bill on tenterhooks.

Rachel recalled those sanguine words. '*Remember these tales of forever and remember them well,*' she said solemnly and continued with the veiled warning. '*Without light, we are nothing but darkness. Without truth, we are nothing but lies. Without souls, we are the Remorrah – the plague of plagues. Fear these harbingers of death, for they hunger and hunt beyond your time.*'

Bill stared at her agog. 'Your mother was right – you do remember everything,' he said with high praise.

Rachel grinned but felt a little embarrassed at his comment and said, 'It does have its uses. Hmmm... I see you've put the price of your Pickled Orange Slices in Organic Oyster Sauce up three times since February.'

Bill chuckled at her observation and said, 'Nothing gets past you, eh?'

'Only when I sleep,' Rachel quipped.

Bill grabbed a cloth off the countertop and gave the honey jar a proper polish. Almost at once, he said, '*Ah, ha – what do we have here then?*'

Intrigued by his outburst, Rachel watched as Bill squinted at the label stuck to the bottom of the honey jar, but he gave up and handed it to her. 'I can make neither head nor tales of the messy writing,' he said.

Rachel gasped. 'Granny's spidery handwriting is unmistakable,' she squeaked as she inspected the minuscule writing. 'I can just make out the words *Grubbins* and *Blue Moon*.'

'Looks like your granny gave us the honey jar as a wedding present,' said Bill thoughtfully and gave her a warm smile. 'Mind you, I think her wedding present should stay in your family – don't you?'

'Are you sure, Bill? It would make a perfect wedding anniversary present,' Rachel intoned, grinning from side to side. 'Our conservatory's full of crystals. Mum's been collecting them for years, but I've never seen one shaped like this one before – she would absolutely love it.'

'Best we wrap it up first, eh?' Bill beamed. 'Why don't we use the newspaper that's stuck to your shoe?'

Rachel glanced down. The newspaper she had used to retrieve the honey jar had unrolled across the floor, but one of the pages had adhered itself to her foot. She slowly peeled it off her sole and placed it on the

countertop, ripping away the newspaper's sticky corner that displayed an advertisement for *Gilly's Gelatinous Glue*.

'WE HAVEN'T GOT ALL DAY YOU KNOW,' a booming voice rang out from one of Bumble's queuing customers.

'BE WITH YOU IN A MINUTE OR TWO,' Bill shouted back, failing to keep the irritation out of his voice.

Rachel hadn't listened to the customer's curt retort: an article in the newspaper had caught her undivided attention, and her cheeks flushed as she read the dramatic headline:

Youngest Prefect Appointed At Plums

Earlier this week, Miss Rachel Cook became the youngest Prefect to be appointed at Plums' Preparatory School. When interviewed, the plucky nine-year-old said...

Rachel couldn't read the writer's mindless dribble anymore; and to make matters worse, the newspaper's photographer had taken an unflattering blurry picture of her left side. The most embarrassing moment of her life lay before her – captured in grainy black and white.

At Plums' prestigious awards ceremony, Mr Graham Prendergast, the school's oldest acting governor, had tripped as he'd hastened to the stage, knocking his pince-nez off his hooked nose. With his antique glasses swinging around his neck, he had stumbled and staggered past Rachel and beamed with pride as he pinned the Prefect's badge onto the chest of a bedraggled Teddy Bear that sat lopsided in a chair.

It should have been her parents' proudest moment, but adding insult to injury, Mr Prendergast had bent down and patted their daughter on the head, mistaking her for Plums' moth-ridden mascot, Mr Twiddles.

Rachel wanted the ground to swallow her up as the packed assembly hall had roared with riotous laughter.

Bill coughed on sensing her discomfort and took the newspaper from her, wrapped it around the honey jar and said, 'Mr Prendergast's been short-sighted since he was knee-high to a grasshopper. Graham's had a few mishaps over the years, but the unfortunate incident at last month's horticultural show forced him to step down from his school duties.

He mistakenly took your Rural Studies teacher, Miss Moffett, for an exceptionally tall carrot and pinned the rosette for first prize to her wild bushy hair, piercing her earlobe.

On seeing so much blood, Basil Buttershaw, our new mayor, fainted into his wheelbarrow, squashing his mammoth-sized marrow, which only came in third due to the dent and the unexpected set of false teeth.'

Rachel smiled back at him and felt a slight pang of guilt that Miss Moffett had fallen foul of Mr Prendergast's bad eyesight.

However, she thought that Minnie was partly to blame for her odd appearance, as she spent every day (and most nights) tending to her precious plants in the school's greenhouses – and she would only leave the school to visit her ailing and ageing parents who lived close by.

Minnie's tireless devotion to her plants had eventually taken its toll: her heavily weathered skin had shrink-wrapped itself around her lanky frame. With her green hair adding to her peculiar look, the grassy strands waved back and forth, giving the impression of an invisible wind above her head, wafting the musty smell of mulch up her pupils' nostrils.

'I dare say your parents were over the moon with your appointment of Prefect?' Bill asked, but regretted his question on seeing her glum face.

'Pleased as punch,' replied Rachel hesitantly. 'Mum thought it would be good for me – you know – all that responsibility.'

Bill lowered his voice to a conspiratorial whisper and said, 'Well, I'm glad I don't have to deal with all that responsibility malarkey – I tend to leave all that stuff to the wife.'

Rachel returned Bill's simpering smile.

As Bill plonked the neatly tied bundle into her willing hands, he said, 'Now, I think it's about time you found your mother –'

His words had barely left his mouth when a gaping mouth locked its slobbery jaws around the bundle. Half splayed across the countertop, a tubby white bulldog dug its claws into the wooden surface.

Rachel shook the bundle from side to side, hoping the dog's jaws would let go, but with its flabby face full of dogged determination, the bulldog bit down even harder and growled menacingly at her.

But then out of the corner of her eye, a broom bore down on the dog's head, and with one decisive thrust, Bill pushed the bristles up against its snout, bellowing furiously, 'GET OFF MY COUNTER – YOU BRUTE!'

The dog's nostrils flared, and frothing saliva oozed out of its mouth.

The broom's head brushed back and forth against the dog's upper lip, but Bill cursed as he dropped his broom and fell onto one knee.

It was now or never, Rachel thought and seized the moment.

Digging her feet in and tugging the bundle towards her, she brought the dog's nose within an inch of her face, took a deep breath and blew as hard as she could up its drooling black nostrils.

Pure instinct kicked in, and she dodged the dog's lightning sneeze.

Taken by surprise by the sheer force of its sneeze, the corpulent canine catapulted backwards and tried to hang on, but its thickset claws scraped across the countertop with a torrid tearing sound, and a split second later, it landed on the grass with a thump and a yelp.

Rachel felt the globules of runny dog snot dribbling down her arm.

'WILBERFORCE – WHAT ARE YOU DOING OVER THERE?' barked a grey-haired woman who pleaded more than shouted at the dazed bulldog with the hungry eyes, 'C'MON BOY – IT'S TIME TO GO HOME NOW.'

Panting with exhaustion, the dog struggled to its feet and waddled away in the opposite direction. The woman let out a frustrated groan and bellowed, 'WHAT ON EARTH HAS GOTTEN INTO YOU TODAY?'

Following behind the flustered woman, the salt and pepper headed man – holding a thick-studded collar and lead – tried to keep up with her determined gait, muttering away to himself, '*He should have gone to puppy class, but oh, no – nobody listens to me...*'

Bill handed Rachel a sweet-smelling flannel, and as she wiped her slimy arm clean, she clutched the bundle close to her chest as if her life depended upon it. Suddenly, her left hand smarted. The bundle's bottom turned scarlet, and the pain intensified as if a bee had stung her.

'That dog's gone and bitten your hand,' Bill snarled, gently pulling the bundle away from her hand, placing it on the scratched countertop.

'I don't think the dog did it on purpose,' Rachel suggested.

'Could have fooled me,' Bill blustered, his hand reaching into the cupboard above her head. 'Ah, the medical tin is still here,' he added with some surprise and placed the dented tin beside the bloodstained bundle.

'No wonder the animals are acting oddly today – this heat is getting unbearable,' Rachel imparted, holding out the palm of her injured hand.

Bill put a few drops of antiseptic onto a white piece of wadding and told her, 'Your warts are bleeding, so this is probably going to hurt a bit.'

'More than it is right now?'

'Most likely –'

'Ouch!' Rachel exclaimed as Bill wiped her warts and applied a thick rubbery plaster over the top of them. 'I had my jabs a couple of months ago – so with a bit of luck I won't get an infection,' she added dryly.

‘Get your mother to check on your bite tonight,’ Bill began, but he averted his gaze and stared out at his customers, who were in full fettle, singing the chorus line, ‘*Why are we waiting – oh, why are we waiting...*’

‘At least they’re in tune,’ Rachel sniggered.

‘I s’ppose I’d better get back to work,’ Bill huffed.

‘I think I’ll go and see how Stew’s getting on mending the candyfloss machine,’ said Rachel enthusiastically. ‘Oh, and thanks for my mum’s wedding anniversary present.’

‘Er, haven’t you forgotten something, Rachel?’ Bill quipped, shaking a couple of honey jars in front of her. ‘I believe your father would be most upset if he didn’t get his regular order of the amber nectar.’

‘Thanks, Bill – could you please put them in my backpack.’

With the honey jars weighing her down, Rachel said goodbye and left his stifling stall and his crabby customers behind.

CHAPTER THREE

Raspberry Surprise

Rachel took a deep breath and immediately regretted it. Her nose turned up in disgust at the stench of rotting food in the midday sun. By the overflowing dustbins, seagulls pulled rubbish bags apart and squabbled over scant sizzling scraps like petulant children.

Then, another scent got up her nose. The overwhelming pong of greasy fat overpowered the foul smell all around her. Heavy footsteps, intermingled with bouts of coughing, wheezing and panting, made her turn around and face the bearded runner with the unsightly string vest.

With a smouldering cigarette still attached to his lower lip, Bobby Growler hacked up a lung as he caught his breath. Leaning against the Maypole, he ignored the seagull squawking in the crown nest and brushed the colourful streamers aside as they lashed about in the fitful wind that threatening to knock his cigarette out of his mouth.

'Now, that's a nasty habit you've got there, Mr Growler,' said Rachel reprovingly, folding her arms defiantly to add to her displeasure.

Bobby wiped his sweaty arm against his sweaty fringe. Not that it did him any good, but he did it again and gave her a wide grin. 'Now, now, Rachel – don't go telling my misses about me smoking,' he pleaded. 'Mavis thinks I've cut down to five a day.'

'Well, at least you're exercising,' she retorted.

Bobby looked mortified. '*Exercising b-be d-dammed,*' he spluttered. 'I'm giving chase – that's what I'm a doing,' he added sourly.

'Chasing what, Mr Growler?'

'I'm chasing down a sausage napper,' he seethed. 'Have you seen a tubby white bulldog? That dratted dog has taken off with me special sausages. Mavis took days to make them, and I have customers waiting back at the van for them. I'm in a right pickle if I don't find them soon.'

Rachel's warts smarted. 'That dog tried to nab my mother's present,' she told him. 'I'm sure I saw it heading down towards *The Red Herring*.'

Bobby's eyes lit up. 'Thanks, Rachel – I owe you one,' he said brightly and flicked his cigarette stub into an upturned dustbin lid. 'We're looking forward to your parents' wedding anniversary bash. Mavis and I will be there in our Sunday best,' he added with a merry wave and waddled along the sandy footpath in all haste taking a cloud of buzzing flies with him.

Rachel glanced over at the candyfloss machine. Stewart, Bella and her mother were there, but also the owners of the tubby white bulldog that had caused so much trouble. As she approached them, she could tell things were not going well...

'Well, I don't know what's wrong with the flipping machine,' Stewart bemoaned. 'I've checked the gaskets that put us out of action last week.'

'Have you checked the right piston?' Bella suggested, sounding a bit tearful. 'You know that side's always been a bit temperamental.'

'I've double-checked everything, and then I double-checked it all again,' said Stewart exasperatedly. 'I'm going to have to take it all apart again – oh, hullo, Rachel – I could do with a second pair of eyes.'

Rachel gave him a reassuring smile and asked, 'No luck then, Stew?'

'Nope, but I haven't given the candyfloss machine a jolly good kick yet,' he grumbled and wiped his greasy arm across his frustrated face.

Rachel gave the candyfloss machine the once over. Dented from top to tail, its bashed outer casing looked similar in appearance to Mr Bumble's metal medical tin (but the candyfloss machine looked like it had been through some horrible experience like falling off a cliff).

With its raised pistons sticking out of its scoured bulbous casing, it reminded her of Christmas past and the plump turkey her father had accidentally overcooked into a smouldering charcoaled mess.

'Want me to take a look?' Rachel asked Stewart.

'Sure – maybe your eyes will spot something I've missed,' he replied, shrugging his shoulders. 'Here, I'll show you what's under the cover.'

Rachel watched as Stewart twisted the bolt handle and removed the maintenance plate. He stepped aside and said glumly, 'I would strongly advise taking a deep breath before you stick your nose in there.'

Rachel took a step forward and peered through the opening. *He's not kidding*, she thought. The strong smell of burnt syrup and other odorous pongs and whiffs wafted up from the egg-shaped engine. Blackened with age, the insalubrious engine compartment contained a staggering array of gears, cogs, valves, pipes and a mishmash of coloured copper wiring.

Rachel's bulging eyes couldn't see anything amiss inside the engine compartment; however, she spied something that most certainly didn't belong. 'You have a spanner in the works,' she added with a straight face.

Crestfallen, Stewart's cheeks flushed with embarrassment as she handed his rusted spanner back into his grubby hands. 'Thanks, Rachel – I was wondering where that had gotten too,' he chuckled. 'I take it you can't see anything obviously wrong with the engine?'

'Nothing out of the ordinary,' she replied. 'Where's the fuel cap?'

'Against your left knee – but I've already checked the fuel level.'

Rachel grimaced. With some effort, she pulled her knee away from the fuel cap, but the long sticky strands of syrup still clung to her skin.

Giving Stewart a smirk, she grabbed the oily rag from his outstretched hand, bent over and wiped her kneecap as clean as she could.

Almost immediately, she spotted the embossed letters that poked through the thick layer of caked-on syrup and grease. With a bit of spit and polish, she rubbed the antiquated brass plaque until it almost shined:

The Most Scrumptious Sweet Award

*For outstanding flavour and fluffiness, we hereby award second prize
to M J Nettlebed.*

Just above the fuel cap, her eagle eyes noticed something else; she wiped the rag across the rough and tough riveted panelling. As Stewart replaced the maintenance plate, she read the dire warning chiselled beside it:

DANGER: ONLY USE GRUBBINS' HONEY!

There's that name Grubbins again, Rachel thought, but as she returned Stewart's rag to him, she asked him sheepishly, 'Are you telling me this candyfloss machine uses honey for fuel?'

Stewart's eyes widened. He bent down on one knee and hissed, 'Not so loud – everyone thinks it runs on vegetable oil – you know – biofuel.'

Rachel couldn't get the words out of her mouth quickly enough. 'But this candyfloss machine is donkey's years old,' she said heatedly, 'and you must use a fair bit of Grubbins' honey to keep up with demand?' she added thoughtfully, glancing over her shoulder at the steady queue of Bumble's customers who were still simmering away under the perpetual sunshine that had brought so many shoppers into town that morning.

'Two barrels a week during the summer months,' Stewart grinned.

Rachel opened the fuel cap. Bubbling up from the bowels of the tank, the overpowering smell of honey assailed her senses. As she replaced the fuel cap, she asked, 'So, what's so special about Grubbins' honey, Stew?'

'Dunno,' he replied, 'and my supplier hasn't a clue, either.'

Rachel gave him an attentive gaze. 'You know, your supplier could be fobbing you off with any old honey,' she pronounced. 'That could explain why the candyfloss machine keeps on playing up.'

Stewart looked horrified. 'Well, of course, it's Grubbins' honey – they charge me enough money for it,' he harrumphed, slightly irked at her accusation, but an annoying niggling sensation told him that she had a

point. 'I can assure you that my supplier is as honest as the day is long,' he added unconvincingly and averted his shifty eyes.

Rachel, however, felt a glimmer of recognition rush into her mind, and she fought hard to recollect one of the newspaper articles she had read in Flocks' Hairdressers (one of the poshest hairstylist along Upper Inkcome's Victorian High Street). 'Um, I think your supplier's been busy these past few months – busy scrumping honey,' she told him outright.

'T-they – they wouldn't dare,' Stewart replied, sounding aloof, but the frog in his throat didn't believe him, either.

Rachel rubbed her throbbing temple; her numbing headache eased as she managed to remember the reporter's words. Composing herself, she said, 'Maybe an article from *The Weekly Wrap* will help prove my point...

Bee Farmers Stung Over Thefts

Bee farmers are furious at the spate of beehive thefts in the area. Bob Jones told The Weekly Wrap: "It's the second theft from my farm this week, and the police still don't have any leads – and neither do I, as the perpetrators stole my guard dog, Finkle and her new toy, Snowdrop."

Police Constable Simon Taylor added: "We'd like to assure the public that we're doing everything in our power to locate these rascals. We've combed the countryside for the stolen beehives, but so far we've come up with nothing – not even a sausage." '

Stewart shifted uneasily on the spot: the truth of the matter dawned on him, and he avoided her accusing eyes by staring at his fidgeting feet.

'Ring any bells now, Stew?' Rachel goaded.

Stewart faced her full on. 'Well, I didn't know the brothers would go out and steal the farmers' beehives – now did I?' he replied defensively.

Rachel sighed and asked, 'Please tell me it wasn't the Grimhalls?'

Stewart stared at her in utter amazement. 'Look, we were desperate, right? Bumbles were going out of business,' he said confrontationally. 'I found the candyfloss machine in their scrapyard – it was a bargain – and they told me getting Grubbins' honey for it wouldn't be a problem.'

'But the Grimhall brothers,' Rachel blustered. 'Stewart – they stole their grandfather's coffin and sold it back to the undertakers!'

'Yes, but their grandfather wasn't in it at the time – now was he?' he argued with steely-eyed resolve. The pregnant pause lingered until he

broke the silence. 'OK, OK, I'll have a word with them. I'll get them to return the farmers' beehives,' he added sullenly. 'Anyway, I'm sure we have enough honey to get us through to the end of the season.'

'What about the dog, Finkle?' Rachel demanded.

'The Grimhalls told me they gave her to the Gribbles,' said Stewart. 'She's guarding their scrapyard at the moment. I'll go and see Mr Jones tomorrow and tell him where he can find his dog.'

'Don't forget her toy, Snowdrop,' Rachel smirked.

'I'll suggest he alarms his beehives from now on,' said Stewart. 'I think two thousand volts should do the trick,' he added slyly.

Rachel grinned at his shocking suggestion and said, 'You won't need any more honey unless the candyfloss machine gets back onto its feet.'

'Well, the machine's been a bit jittery over the past week,' Stewart informed her, 'and it all started when some dratted rodent got inside the main compartment and gnawed through some of the electrical cables.'

Rachel paused for thought. 'You're probably right, Stew – but I would still like to look underneath?' she pressed him.

'Be my guest.'

In for a penny, Rachel mused and took off her backpack. She eased herself onto a couple of old sacks and wriggled herself along the uneven ground, and she soon found herself laying directly beneath the oily drum.

(Lorraine, Bella and the dog owners were far too busy asking people about the missing dog to notice she had all but disappeared.)

There wasn't much natural daylight illuminating the underneath of the machine's casting and adding to her annoyance, the torch beside her had died as soon as she had switched it on, so she asked Stewart to look in her backpack for her grandmother's torch. With the flip of its Bakelite switch, the torch emitted an amber beam that fell across the imposing drum, which gave the unsettling impression of a coiled snake.

Making herself as comfortable as possible lying on the lumpy grass, she reached up and attempted to turn the drum, but after a couple of times, she finally gave up in frustration, as the sticky heat had drained her resolve. Breathlessly, she ran the torchlight over its scaly surface.

Rachel grinned. Wedged between the drum and the scorched casing, a hexagonal object glistened in the amber light. With renewed vigour, she reached up, clasped her fingers around the object and tried to force it free, but to her chagrin, it wasn't coming that easily.

She reached up again and pulled with all her might, and with a loud scraping sound, the object came away, but her triumph ended with a yell of pain and a dull thud as she fell against the sacks – jarring her spine.

Bill's blood-soaked plaster hung limply from the palm of her hand.

'Rachel – what's going on down there?' Stewart called out.

Rachel didn't answer as a most peculiar feeling had come over her.

The pain from her warts and spine vanished in an instant. The hairs on the back of her neck stood to attention – and she sensed danger.

CLUNK! CLICK!

Instinctively, she snapped her head to one side just as the drum dropped down from the casting, thundering by her ear with a whooshing noise. Moments later, the skewered sack ripped apart as the rumbling drum instantly retracted, rattling loudly as it flew by her ear again.

CLUNK! CLICK!

The drum quivered and plunged towards her, but before she had time to react, a pair of strong hands grabbed her ankles, and she groaned as her back bounced over the rough ground.

Stewart dropped beside her. 'Are you all right, Rachel?' he demanded.

The candyfloss machine fell still and silent.

Rachel got up and onto her elbows. 'Well, apart from a sore spine – I'm just peachy,' she grinned. 'Pull me up, Stew.'

'But – but why was the machine running at all!' Stewart exclaimed, utterly dumbfounded as he carefully pulled her off the ground. 'It isn't even switched on,' he added puzzlingly. 'So, what was wrong with it?'

'I found a piece of metal jamming up the works,' Rachel answered, realising she had left the hexagonal object behind.

'Right, I'll fire her up and see if that was the problem,' said Stewart excitedly, bending down to retrieve the machine's starting handle that lay amongst a messy pile of mechanical knickknacks. Wiping the sweat from his glistening brow with the back of his hand, he slotted the handle into the side of the machine and began to turn it over. 'I'd stand back from the exhausts if I were you, Rachel,' he added quickly, and as if on cue, the machine coughed a couple of times and then spluttered into life.

Rachel jumped back and watched the pistons pound furiously up and down. As the candyfloss machine chugged along at an alarming rate, a thick veil of scarlet smoke belched out of its twin exhausts. The ground rumbled as the rasping engine spun even faster. On hearing the almighty din, Lorraine, Bella and the missing dog owners trotted towards them.

'RACHEL'S FIXED IT, GRAN,' Stewart bellowed.

Bella beamed out and clapped her hands with glee. 'Oh, thank you, Rachel – you're a miracle worker,' she said, giving her an affectionate embrace. 'We'll keep our customers because of you.'

'Here, take a look at this,' Stewart called over his shoulder. 'I do believe we're all in for a treat,' he added enthusiastically, whisking a wooden stick inside the candyfloss machine's drum. Bella drew close, and as she pecked him affectionately on his grubby cheek, he handed the brightly coloured candyfloss into her willing hand.

'Oooh!' she said giddily. 'We've never been able to make raspberry before. Now, this will definitely be a firm favourite with our customers.'

'Rachel should be the one to taste her creation,' Stewart chortled.

'Thanks for the offer, Stew,' she said sourly, shouldering her sagging backpack, 'but I can't stand raspberries.'

'And they make her come out in lumps and bumps,' added Lorraine. 'I remember last summer when she'd eaten far too many of them. We had to take her to the doctors, as her face puffed up like a bag of popcorn.'

Rachel glowered back at her mother, but she spotted something shiny poking out from beneath a half-chewed ham sandwich.

Ignoring the gabbling conversation going on all around her, she bent down, picked it up and studied the hexagonal metal object that had undoubtedly been the cause of the candyfloss machine's malfunction.

The odd object reminded her of a mariner's astrolabe, as she had seen a couple of them on display in Upper Inkcome's only museum. Using a handkerchief and a bit of spit, she rubbed its pitted surface and scrubbed the bloody muck and grease from out of its deep grooves.

'Mrs Cook, would you like a candyfloss?' Stewart asked, offering a raspberry candyfloss to her.

'Oh, not for me thank you, Stewart,' Lorraine replied. 'I'd like to be able to fit into my wedding dress on my anniversary.'

'Mr and Mrs Higgins – can I tempt you two?' Stewart began.

'Not for us, Stewart,' said Mrs Higgins. 'We need to find –'

'*Wilberforce*,' said Rachel and read the rest of the engraved inscription on the dog tag she had just cleaned. '*Owners, Diana and Harold Higgins.*'

'That's right, my dear – have you seen our dog?' Diana asked.

Rachel smiled. Sitting on its haunches and munching on half a ham sandwich, Wilberforce sat between its owners. 'Er – he's sitting right beside you,' she chuckled, pointing at their tubby white bulldog that wagged its tail, but it looked very docile and didn't look like the same brutish dog that had attacked her bundle back Bumble's Beehive stall.

Diana let out a sudden cry of relief and threw her arms around the dog's rotund neck. Harold ruffled the dog's head and said, 'Good, boy – I knew you would turn up sooner or later.'

Rachel handed Diana's dog tag back to her. 'Um – thank you, Rachel,' Diana said, thoroughly bemused as she showed it to her husband.

The Higgins huddled together. They whispered to one another in surprised tones; they turned the dog tag over repeatedly as if they hadn't seen it before and gave Rachel a curious gaze as she joined Stewart by the candyfloss machine that chugged away.

'Thanks for mending the candyfloss machine,' Stewart told Rachel, patting its uneven metal surface affectionately. 'I owe you one.'

'You know I'm going to remember that –' she began.

'HEY – WHAT'S GOING ON OVER THERE?'

From the back of Bumble's Beehive stall, Bill waved at them and bellowed, 'HAVE YOU FIXED THE CANDYFLOSS MACHINE?'

'WE'RE BACK IN BUSINESS, LOVE – BE WITH YOU IN A MO,' Bella shouted back, holding up her raspberry candyfloss like a prized trophy.

Bill gave her the thumbs up, turned around, clicked his heels together and disappeared back into his stall.

'I think it's time we were getting back home, Rachel,' said Lorraine. 'I've got the cooking to prepare, and we're meeting your father at work – *what's that blood on your hand?*'

'Oh, it's nothing – I just knocked my warts,' Rachel fibbed, but her mother still took hold of her hand with lightning speed. 'It isn't that bad – it's just dried blood,' she added dismissively, as she knew if her mother found out the truth, she would be back to see their doctor in a flash.

'Now, I'll be the judge of that,' Lorraine coddled and inspected her daughter's hand. 'Right, I need something to wipe that dried blood off.'

As Lorraine spat on a handkerchief and slowly wiped the blood away, Rachel felt like a small child much to Stewart's amusement as he gave her a furtive glance and sniggered at her embarrassment.

'Nearly done,' said Lorraine sweetly.

'Thanks, Mum,' she said, rubbing the skin near her nagging warts.

'Does it still hurt?'

'Only a little bit.'

'Here, let Mummy kiss it better,' said Lorraine cooingly, and before Rachel could object, she had bent down and kissed her hand, but her mother's head suddenly snapped back, and she let out a muffled scream and staggered sideways in shock.

Lorraine almost keeled over in a dazed stupor, but Rachel grabbed her arms and steadied her swaying as she muttered words of nonsense.

With rising fear and growing concern, Rachel stared up into her mother's deathly white face and shrieked, '*Mum – what's wrong?*'

At first, her mother didn't seem to know she was even there, let alone answer her desperate question, but after a moment or two, Lorraine's soft hands cupped her daughter's face, and she smiled down at her.

'I've – I've forgotten so much,' Lorraine choked, her moist eyes welling up again. 'I'd forgotten how much I loved you, Rachel,' she added tearfully and hugged her so tightly, she thought she heard a rib crack.

'I love you too, Mum,' Rachel replied, returning her mother's warm embrace, trying not to sound overawed by her public show of affection.

As her mother held her even tighter, Rachel couldn't fathom out why she was acting so strange and completely out of character.

Eventually, Lorraine released Rachel from her tender clutches and reached hurriedly into her glittering turquoise handbag; she pulled out a handkerchief, dabbed at her damp face and then blew her nose so loud it scared the neighbouring seagulls half to death.

Drawing herself up to her full height, Lorraine composed herself and said, 'Now, Rachel – how would you like a trip to the park?'

CHAPTER FOUR

Professor Shire's Legacy

With the sun still bearing down on the farmers' market, Rachel told her mother she would go anywhere that would give her a respite from the relentless rays. Saying their goodbyes to everyone, they headed away from the smattering of stalls that were still doing a rip-roaring trade.

No trip to the park would be complete without some sort of picnic, so they stopped off at Anglo & Saxon's newsagents and bought a bag of crisps, a couple of drinks, sandwiches and a bag of salty peanuts.

In no time at all, Rachel and Lorraine had reached the oldest part of town; they battled their way through the narrow undulating streets. The town's Northern Quarter became bottlenecks for tourists who flocked into souvenir shops – buying all sorts of tacky, overpriced merchandise.

'Excuse me... sorry about your foot... make way, coming through – coming through...' Lorraine huffed and puffed, squeezing, pushing – and sometimes shoving – tourists who weren't quick enough to get out of her way as they marvelled at the town's medieval castle, taking in the ancient atmosphere and taking numerous pictures of the imposing keep.

Leaving the crowded castle behind, Rachel struggled to keep up with her mother's impossible gait, and with the cloying stitch down her left side, she felt as if her lungs were on fire (and it hadn't help matters that she had to dodge the mountainous molehills that plagued every street).

'We're nearly there, Rachel,' Lorraine called over her shoulder. 'We'll take the shortcut down this street,' she added briskly. 'Now, watch your step with those cracked paving slabs and the rubbish in the gutter.'

Too hot and bothered to answer her mother, she just grunted that she understood. Disregarding the many *DO NOT ENTER* signs that blocked the entrance to the street, Lorraine pushed the plastic bollards aside and quickly beckoned her over. Reluctantly, Rachel followed her mother's eager footsteps and meandered into the depressing tree-lined street.

Keeling over in a bunch of weeds, the mossy street sign *WTS' END* appeared to be on its last legs; and a few doors down, a pile of masonry had dented the warning sign so badly it now said *DANGR! LOOS MASNRY!*

Rachel peered up and down the street that left a puzzled expression on her face: every house had suffered from some sort of unfathomable damage. Number thirty-five hadn't a roof, and most of it had sunk into the earth. In the grounds next door, only a shattered greenhouse with a cracked porcelain toilet stood, while at number eleven, the front door stood alone because everything else lay smashed to smithereens.

On every scrap of land, an overabundance of molehills poked through unloved garden beds and overgrown lawns. The wind started to pick up and whipped the green leaves off the trees; however, they hadn't blown away and remained glued to the ground. The leaves wobbled and wilted into a revolting brown sludge with a foul stench to match.

The wind veered and brought fresh air with it. Above the whistling wind that swept through the grotty red-bricked buildings, Rachel could still hear faint scuttling sounds – proof that at least some life had found refuge in this desolate place. Nevertheless, it had occurred to her that the rats and mice probably didn't want to be here anymore than she did.

'Mum – what happened to the street?' she asked, the dismal street giving her the chills as the dull daylight drew ever drearier.

Lorraine's brow furrowed. 'Something to do with the foundations,' she said hesitantly. 'We're standing over one of the old mines, but this one shut down years ago, so it begs the question why are they still here?' she added thoughtfully, knelt down and put her ear to the ground.

Rachel watched her batty behaviour in sheer disbelief (and hoped she wouldn't inherit her mother's trait of going dotty at forty).

'Now, that's most peculiar – I can't hear a thing. Hmmm... I wonder where they've gone,' Lorraine mumbled and got to her feet. 'I dare say Mr Burrows took them back home and locked them up. It looks like they've been up to their old tricks again. C'mon, Rachel – it's getting a bit nippy without the sun on our backs – let's get to the park.'

Begrudgingly, she followed her mother along the pavement, but the concrete soon petered out, as the ground underfoot gave way to squelchy grass. Feeling slightly envious, she wondered if her mother had webbed feet as she strode ahead and made long strides without slipping once.

Lorraine bounded over the lip of a hill and vanished. Rachel adjusted her bulging backpack and bounded after her.

'Welcome to the park,' said Lorraine gushingly with a growing smile. 'One of the largest natural freshwater lakes in the country – or so I'm informed by the proprietor of this establishment,' she added zestfully, patting the peeling – slightly buckled – billboard affectionately like a long lost friend. 'So, Rachel, are you excited about our picnic in the park?'

Rachel stepped out of the billboard's gloomy shadow and scowled as she groaned; however, her mother's face lit up like a Christmas tree.

'Cheer up, Rachel – we've come this far – let's give the park a whirl,' she urged, doing her utmost to win her over. 'It's not as bad as it looks.'

No – it looks a whole lot worse, thought Rachel, reading the drivel that someone had plastered over the billboard to tempt people into the park:

Welcome to Shire's Waterpark

Come into our water wonderland and try out our many new attractions.

The sultry sun terrace; the tantalising toddlers' paddling pool and the positively palatial playpen; the bountiful bouncy castle; the resplendent refreshment kiosk and, of course, not forgetting the main reason that brought you here in the first place, paddling a boat in one of the largest natural freshwater lakes in the country.

Rachel let out a deflated sigh. Alone in the dark, the sun terrace had a black tarpaulin draped across its veranda. Ankle deep in black sludge, the toddlers' paddling pool wasn't fit for purpose – unless you really wanted to catch some horrible disease. Unloved and forgotten, the rotten wooden climbing frame lay trapped in humongous sand dunes, and just a stone's throw away, a listing buoy and chain held a partly deflated bouncy castle prisoner as shrieking seagulls perched on its wobbly turrets. Nestled between two gargantuan rocks, countless spiders' webs mummified the dilapidated refreshment kiosk that looked as appealing as a bout of flu.

'Now, Rachel, would you take a gander at that,' Lorraine beamed, her unwavering gaze peering down into a rocky cove. 'Time to meet an old friend,' she added brightly, almost running as she took off at speed.

Rachel dragged her legs past the hairy kiosk and followed her mother down the snaking path towards the jetty, where a log cabin stood on wooden stilts. Right beside it, a bedraggled flag fluttered lethargically atop a weather-beaten pole. Discoloured bunting intertwined with the cabin's guttering and directly below it, a couple of paddleboats bobbed up and down, but the rest of them had sunk to the bottom of the lake.

Rachel sidled up to her mother.

'It hasn't changed a bit,' Lorraine smiled, casting her eyes over at the log cabin that stood at the end of a limp rope bridge.

Rachel chewed her lower lip: she felt she had been here before, but she couldn't have because she would have remembered it. The log cabin looked a trifle unsteady as it swayed uncomfortably on its bamboo stilts, which reminded her of a creeping centipede.

The elongated plastic PAY AT DESK sign had come loose and flapped annoyingly against the black-tarred roof. The CLOSED FOR LUNCH sign swung gently back and forth behind the sliding window.

'Closed for lunch,' Lorraine snapped. 'We'll soon see about that,' she added bombastically and strutted across the rope bridge.

Rachel stepped onto the wooden slats and pretended she didn't hear the creaking and cracking noises as she made her way across. As she stepped off the rope bridge, she heard her mother shout, 'SHOP!'

Lorraine pounded the sliding glass window repeatedly.

'Perhaps nobody's at home,' Rachel began, but she soon heard the irritating snoring noise coming from within the confines of the log cabin. With a few short strides, she reached the weathered wooden front door and rattled the loose doorknob. 'The door's locked, Mum.'

Lorraine gave up on the window and joined her. 'Looks like we're in luck – now, let me see...' she mused, pursing her lips as she grabbed hold of the doorknob. 'Let me see if I can remember the exact sequence correctly... it was left – then right – then left again – then down – then up – then counterclockwise – then clockwise – and then up and down four times and pull...'

CLICK.

'You're not the only one with a good memory, Rachel,' she added with a cheeky grin and released the doorknob.

The door swung open with surprising force and vigour. Thoroughly amazed by her mother's unusual house breaking skill, she followed her inside and gave the drooping doorknob a furtive glance: eleven etched bees encircled the brass keyhole.

The snoring intensified as they crossed the cabin's threshold.

Rachel went to shut the door behind her, but the spring-loaded mechanism took control, and with a sudden whizzing sound, the heavy door slammed shut with so much force the bamboo flooring shuddered.

They turned and peered at the culprit who was making the deafening noise. Lying prostrate in a blue and green striped deckchair, the short wiry-framed man hadn't moved a muscle as the door had slammed shut. Seemingly unaware of their presence, he smacked his dry lips, flipped onto his back and snored like a whale with a stuffy cold.

'Mr Lido – Mr Lido wake up,' Lorraine demanded.

Mr Lido's snoring stopped, but he just rolled onto his side, fidgeted for a moment or two, pulled his flat tweed cap even further over his eyes and mumbled crossly, 'We're closed for lunch – can't you see the sign.'

Lorraine fumed. 'Lrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrry!' she thundered.

China teacups and saucers rattled on the makeshift bamboo table.

'*I'm awake – I'm awake, dearest,*' cried Larry as the rickety deckchair collapsed beneath him. His flat cap, however, had flown in the opposite direction and tumbled unceremoniously into a bowl of cold curdled soup.

With his legs still trapped in his deckchair, he rubbed his tired eyes. 'Well, you're not the misses,' he said with a puzzled look, staring up at Lorraine's inscrutable face.

Rachel waited for her mother's wrath to be unleashed, but nothing happened. Lorraine wasted no time, bent down and freed Larry from his predicament. Back on his feet, she shook his hand so hard his black Wellington boots squeaked.

'It's such a pleasure to meet you again, Larry,' she said tearfully as she flashed him one of her rare *I really am pleased to see you* smiles. 'It's been such a long time – and how's your wife, Lydia?'

Larry seemed thoroughly bemused by Lorraine's familiarity. 'Er – Lydia's fine... um... do I know you?' he asked her warily, patting his head as he just realised his flat cap wasn't there anymore. 'How did you get inside? I'm pretty sure I locked the door.'

Lorraine went to say something, but she thought better of it and went deathly quiet. However, she let out a long sigh and said, 'You really don't remember me – do you, Larry?'

Larry rubbed his peppery stubble; his grey eyes scoured Lorraine's face for any signs of recognition, but he shrugged his shoulders in defeat. 'Sorry, but I haven't a clue who you are –'

Then all of a sudden, he stepped over the collapsed deckchair and gawped at Rachel. She felt most uncomfortable as the stranger's dull eyes stared into her face, but little by little, they grew brighter, and he clapped his hands together in gleeful recognition.

'Now, would you Adam "n" Eve it,' he chuckled, the lines across his craggy face doubling in width as he let out a roar of laughter. 'Well, if it isn't the baby, Rachel – I'd recognised those emerald eyes and that cute button nose anywhere. Look at you – all grown up – what, you must be eleven years old by now –?'

'– I'm still ten,' Rachel cut in, but she immediately regretted her rude outburst and gave him a reassuring smile.

Larry's face filled with joy. He gave her a friendly wink, turned to face Lorraine, grabbed hold of her hand and shook it enthusiastically. 'Mrs Cook – Lorraine – now, you're a welcome sight and no mistake.

How could I have forgotten you,' he cried, looking at the pair of them with sparkling eyes. 'It's been such a long time since the incident, but Rachel doesn't seem any the worse for it.'

Rachel couldn't take her eyes off her mother. 'What incident, Mum?' she asked tentatively with a bit of curiosity thrown in for good measure.

Lorraine sniffed. 'Your father and I took you to Shire's Waterpark on your first birthday,' she said misty-eyed. 'We wanted to go back to the place where you were –' she added, but her words ended, and she gave Larry a painful look as she clasped her hands together in anguish.

Larry cleared his throat and gave Lorraine a subtle nod. He turned towards Rachel and said, 'I was down by the shoreline with Suzy. It was our first day on the job together. I looked up from cleaning the deck, as I heard strange slurping noises, and the screaming started.

When I stood up, I saw Lorraine at the water's edge holding on to you as a freak whirlpool tried to suck you both down. Damnedest thing I've ever laid eyes on. Your dad clung onto your mum, but those churning waters were just too strong. You and your mum were going under.'

'If Larry hadn't come to our rescue,' added Lorraine gratefully, 'we wouldn't be standing here today. Larry's a hero.'

Larry's ruddy cheeks went even redder and said, 'And don't forget about Suzy. I couldn't have done it without her – that girl's a diamond.'

No wonder the waterpark seemed familiar, Rachel thought. *Her childhood fear of water began here.* Her headache nagged at her, so she brushed those dark feelings aside and took a step forward to shake Larry's hand, but she gave him a *thank-you* hug instead and whispered in his cauliflower ear, 'Thanks for saving my mum, Larry.'

'My pleasure,' he replied warmly and grinned.

'I'd like to thank Suzy, too,' Rachel added. 'Does she still work here?'

'She sure does,' Larry chuckled. 'Suzy's down by the jetty with the misses – um – I mean Lydia.'

'Well, as you've had your lunchtime snooze,' Lorraine told Larry, giving him her broadest smile, 'Rachel and I would like to have our picnic on Shire's Island – so we'd like to hire one of your boats.'

Rachel's insides churned. Larry's boats didn't look very seaworthy. Aghast at her mother's suggestion, she squeaked, 'We're going all the way out to the island – that little spec on the horizon?'

'The island's a lot closer than you think,' Lorraine replied, 'and at this time of year, a leisurely picnic in Spring Park and its shady woods would be wonderful right now – and a chance to get away from this heat.'

Larry groaned.

'What's the matter, Larry?' Lorraine asked. 'Is there a problem?'

'The parks aren't open at the moment,' he replied dejectedly, picking his sunken flat cap from out of the soup bowl and dropping it into the plastic bucket beside him.

'None of them?' squeaked Lorraine.

Larry nodded glumly.

Lorraine took a deep breath and composed herself. 'Well, Rachel and I can at least have our picnic on Oyster Bay,' she said positively upbeat. 'I have some fond memories of that sandy beach,' she added dreamily.

Larry looked downtrodden. 'I'm sorry, Lorraine, but the island and its beaches have been closed off for donkey's years,' he said solemnly.

'What did you just say?' snapped Lorraine, narrowing her eyes almost to slits, as she didn't quite believe what she had just heard.

'As the main benefactor of Professor Shire's will, it was up to me to carry out Thomas' wishes to –' Larry began.

'– Larry, how could you do such a thing?' Lorraine spat, towering above him, her eyes pinning him down with furious ferocity.

Rachel wondered if she should go and hide in the toilet or the alcove, as she wanted to keep out of the line of fire. At first, Larry said nothing as he clenched his teeth and scowled; he balled his fists in a bid to stem his anger, but he quickly grew tired of Lorraine's raging sharp tongue.

'I don't own Shire's Island,' Larry growled, slamming his fists down on his table in frustration, completely ignoring the bits of bamboo that shot across the room. 'Thomas left everything to me – everything but the island and that went to Henry Silverback.'

Lorraine's fiery face mellowed at once. 'Thomas entrusted the island to Henry – what on earth was he thinking?' she snarled, morally shocked on hearing the grave news.

'I couldn't believe it either when Thomas' solicitor read out his will,' added Larry woefully. 'It's like putting the fox in charge of the hen house – madness – sheer and utter madness!'

'I'm sorry I ever doubted you, Larry,' said Lorraine meekly.

Larry shuffled his feet; he looked very ill at ease, and his face went paler than a runny egg white. 'I'm sorry you've been kept in the dark for so long, Lorraine,' he lamented. 'Do you remember the day Thomas went missing? The newspapers had a field day what with all those whirlpools popping in and out of place. The police searched the lake, but they gave up when they found his brown boots and gingham socks,' he added with

a deepening frown, clearly bereft to be the bearer of bad news – no matter how late or bad that news was.

Lorraine sighed. 'I always believed that Thomas went off on another one of his expeditions – you know what he was like back then,' she said.

'June Wrigley still lays the table for him at *The Frumpy Friar*,' Larry told her. 'After all these years, she still carries a torch for him – and refuses to believe he's dead and gone.'

'I've missed so much...' Lorraine muttered but said no more.

Larry chewed his bottom lip. 'Oh, bugger the law,' he pronounced and stomped his foot on the floor, appearing unperturbed that a strange cracking noise that had immediately followed his act of defiance. 'Laws were meant to be broken – and it's about bloody time we found out what Henry's been doing on that island,' he added doggedly. 'He's been back and forth there for ten years now. He's been digging for who knows what – and on one occasion he asked to borrow Suzy – but, of course, I told him to put it where the sun doesn't shine.'

Rachel sniggered.

'Rumour has it that Henry's gone and left the island for good – and I've seen neither hide nor hair of him these past few months,' added Larry broodingly. 'Only the other day, Lydia told me her uncle got chatting to a bloke down the docks, whose brother knows a chimney sweep, whose wife works at the butchers, whose niece works as a barmaid... um – now, where was I? Oh, yes, well, the barmaid at *The Golden Toad* said that after one of Henry's lackeys had downed a couple of pints of their strongest ale, he blabbed on about how he'd come into a small fortune along with Henry and his brother Wilfred.'

'I dare say if Henry caught us trespassing on the island, he'd lock us up and throw away the key,' added Lorraine morosely.

'Well, we're just going to have to risk it,' Larry urged. 'C'mon – we'll use my Mud Skipper to get us to the island. Lydia should be down with Suzy right now. We'll have a nice cup of tea, and then we'll cast off.'

'What's a Mud Skipper?' Rachel asked.

'Oh, I think you better ask Suzy that,' Larry chuckled.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Mud Skipper Skips

Rachel sipped on her piping hot cup of tea; its steam rose high into the air as the doldrums descended across the waterpark.

Behind her and with a sack of coal over his shoulder, Larry climbed down a corroded set of metal stairs and let out a groan as he dumped the last sack onto the jetty. He wiped his brow with an oily rag, blew his nose on it and shoved it back into his pocket.

Catching his breath, he caught Rachel's eye. 'Have you thanked Suzy for saving your life?' he grinned.

'Thank you, Suzy,' she said, raising her teacup as if she was about to toast the bride and groom. 'Thanks for saving my mum's life and mine.'

Only the constant lapping of waves greeted her eardrums.

'Suzy's the silent type, but she appreciates your sentiment,' said Larry with an air of merriment.

'She's a diamond,' said Rachel, but she meant every word of it as she stared at the stumpy black painted steamboat in front of her. 'Shanghai Suzy's quite an unusual name for a boat – how did she come by it?'

Larry warmed to her question. 'Now there's the rub,' he said, lost in thought as he thought about his reply. 'Well, at one time, Suzy belonged to Professor Shire, but he lost her in a race – no, hang on, my memory's been a bit foggy of late. Right, come to think of it, I'm pretty sure Thomas lost her in a game of cards. It's all a bit hazy, but the Mud Skipper ended up with Suzy, and she renamed it after herself and her home.'

'Isn't it bad luck to change a boat's name?' Rachel offered.

'Oh, it is,' replied Larry, 'but only to those seafarers who believe in such ridiculous notions.'

'How did Suzy end up in your hands –?' Rachel began.

'HEY – ARE YOU TWO COMING ABOARD?' boomed Lydia.

Larry grimaced. 'JUST THE COAL TO COME ON BOARD, MY DEAR,' he bellowed back with equal zeal. 'OK, Rachel – let's get these sacks of coal put away before Lydia bends my ear again.'

The onshore breeze picked up, but Rachel wasn't the least bit chilly as she helped Larry drag the sacks of coal along the gangplank and into the hold. He closed the hold's wooden cover and handed her a modestly clean rag for her dirty hands, but she was pleased to hand it back.

Rachel's stomach gurgled then growled with hunger.

Larry smiled, smacked his hands together and said, 'I think someone needs a spot of lunch before we set sail.'

'I better go and see Mum and ask her if she wouldn't mind me eating my sandwiches now,' Rachel said, and her stomach growled even louder.

Larry appeared horrified at her culinary suggestion. 'Sandwiches – sandwiches,' he protested vehemently. 'We'll have none of that talk on board my boat,' he added wildly and patted his belly. 'What we need is a right royal fry up. I'll get Suzy underway, and Lydia will see us right.'

'I thought you've already had your lunch, Larry?' Rachel remarked, unable to hide the smirk that had sprouted across her face. 'Cold curdled soup – if I'm not mistaken,' she added light-heartedly.

'It was curdled all right,' he retorted, 'and that homemade nettle and pea soup still haven't finished curdling in my stomach. Now, a healthy dose of sausage, eggs, bacon and fried bread should put that to bed...'

Rachel left Larry to his chores; however, every now and then, he would regale her with basic nautical terms: Port, Starboard, Aft, Forward, Foc'sle, Derrick, Bluff Bow, Flotsam, and Jetsam and so it went on.

With his work all done and dusted, Larry let out a long yawn and said, 'Right, time to get Suzy underway.'

Rachel followed him to the back of the boat, and he gave her a quick tour of Suzy's aft. Sandwiched between the square wheelhouse and the hold, the red and black banded funnel lay at a slight angle above the engine room. Housed below the wheelhouse, the cramped crew quarters contained bunk beds, a table and a blackened stove, where an ornately crafted Chinese kettle had just come to the boil.

Rachel looked surprised: Larry certainly had the gift of the gab, as he had persuaded her mother that a full breakfast would prevent her from being seasick. He gave her a wink and dashed into the engine room to stoke the dwindling fire. With another fresh piping hot cup of tea in her hand, Rachel made her way back onto the deck and felt the wind pick up.

Suzy's twin engines spluttered into life. A charcoal-grey cloud of smoke shot out of her single funnel. The wooden deck shook violently as the pistons kicked in, but they soon settled down as they built up speed.

Rachel shuffled her way across the hold's cover and sat cross-legged at its exact centre. Her fingers almost crushed the teacup with nervous apprehension as the jetty swiftly fell away from sight. Only the single mast and derrick blocked her vista of the vast freshwater lake. As the Suzy continued to pick up speed, Rachel hadn't felt the least bit seasick; however, the funnel's puffing noises made her want to nod off to sleep.

Larry joined Rachel on top of the hold. 'Lydia's busy gossiping to your mother at the moment,' he told her and handed her a chipped porcelain plate, stacked high with sandwiches dripping with greasy fat.

'Larry, I thought you said you hated sandwiches?' Rachel chuckled, grabbing the napkins off him before they blew away in the brisk wind.

'Ah,' he replied, cautiously parting his sandwich. 'Now, it takes a rare skill to jam a full English breakfast between two pieces of fried bread.'

With her hunger pangs screaming for food, Rachel watched Larry mimicking her posture, and he sat crossed-legged right beside her. They said nothing as they tucked into their fatty food. With the meal done and dusted, Larry pointed out some of the lake's abundant sea life:

'Look over there – just beyond Suzy's stern... there's a dry-boned beanie diving for fish. Now, over to port, we have a pair of giggling gannets – very rare nowadays. Well, bless my soul – there's a fluther of gimballled jellyfish bobbing about on our bow wave...'

Suzy steamed ahead.

'I think I'll go and see where my mum's gotten to,' Rachel told Larry.

Larry looked over his shoulder. 'Oh, she's a bit on the busy side at the moment,' he snorted, 'but she's having a whale of a time steering Suzy.'

Rachel whipped her head around and stared up at the wheelhouse, looking stunned as her mother stood at the helm with the steering wheel grasped firmly in her hands. Managing a smile, her mother gave her an excited wave as she steamed just that little bit closer to the mainland.

'B-but – but m-my mum hasn't even passed her driving test yet,' stammered Rachel, looking stunned as her mother forged further ahead. 'Larry – she's failed it eleven times, and you're letting her steer Suzy?'

'Don't worry,' he said calmly, 'Lydia's keeping a close eye on her –'

Lydia's svelte figure stood before them. Blotches of greasy food and smudges of coal smothered her red lobster printed apron that billowed in the cool breeze like a ship's spinnaker.

'You've left Lorraine alone – steering Suzy?' asked Larry flabbergasted.

'Oh, she's perfectly fine,' replied Lydia dismissively, her long auburn hair thrashing aimlessly behind her. 'Lorraine's a natural at the helm.'

'Why aren't we heading towards the island?' Rachel asked.

'Lorraine's taking Suzy the long way round,' Lydia replied.

'You mean the tourists' route,' added Larry hotly.

'It's only ten minutes out of our way, Larry,' Lydia told him huffily. 'Anyway, Lorraine wanted to give Rachel a tour of the lake before we set foot on the island,' she added and handed Rachel a grubby sou'wester hat. 'Now, I don't want you getting sunburn on this trip – so I found this fisherman's hat in one of the old trunks. I'm pretty sure it will fit you.'

'The colour matches your cute button nose,' Larry chuckled.

'Well, I just love the colour,' smiled Rachel and plonked the pink sou'wester hat on top of her head, letting Lydia fiddle and fumble with the thin grey straps that whipped back and forth in the blustery breeze.

'Perfect fit,' said Lydia gleefully. 'It could have been made for you.'

'It must have belonged to a girl,' Rachel insisted, 'as I can't see any fisherman going to work wearing this pretty colour.'

'I dunno – they're a funny lot around here,' Larry scoffed.

BRRRRRRRRRRRR!

Suzy's constipated foghorn blurted out once more.

Rachel glanced up at the wheelhouse; her mother beamed back at her, and with a hearty but stern grin, she spun the wheel so hard to starboard, discomforting creaks, groans and moans rumbled throughout the boat's decking, protesting against the handling of the boat by its overzealous captain who now stared dead ahead with resolute determination.

Shire's Island loomed closer, and Suzy drew nearer to the expanse of ruddy-coloured mud that glistened in the scorching sunlight.

'What on earth's Lorraine playing at?' Lydia snapped.

'She's – s-she's s-speeding up!' Larry stammered, looking stunned as plumes of dirty smoke belched out of the funnel at a frightening rate.

The funnel's rough rasping noise competed with the waves crashing against the bow. Lydia waved her arms at Lorraine to stop, but Suzy stayed on course and sped onwards towards the encroaching mudflats.

'*My mum's gone stark raving mad,*' Rachel muttered.

'I'll go and stop her,' Lydia yelled and shot towards the wheelhouse.

'She's coming in way too fast,' Larry cried, but as he attempted to get up, Suzy veered so violently to port, he lost his footing, and he fell onto his side – smashing plates as he went down. His arms floundered, and he rolled across the hold's cover, crashing onto the juddering deck.

Suzy went to starboard and then back to port so fast, he couldn't get his sea legs no matter how hard he tried.

Rachel didn't like it, either, so in one swift – and surprising – move, she leapt off the hold and landed squarely on her feet right next to him.

'I don't feel too good,' Larry moaned as she helped him back onto his unsteady legs. 'I – I think I'm going to be sick,' he added lightheadedly, his sickly face the colour of his unappetising lunchtime soup.

Suzy zigzagged across the shimmering lake.

Groaning gears grated on Rachel's teeth. Suzy jolted twice and then shuddered thrice – and rocked from side to side.

'What's happening to Suzy?' Rachel asked Larry, jumping out of her skin in shock as the twin keels dropped into the water with a thunderous splash, spraying everyone with a mist of bitterly cold freshwater.

Suzy slowed down.

Larry's face filled with joy. His face turned a healthy shade of pink as he clapped his hands excitedly, and at the top of his voice and above the hullabaloo, he shouted, 'WE'RE ABOUT TO SKIP ACROSS THE MUD!'

Seconds later, Suzy's steam engine died.

Larry cheered and whooped. Rachel, however, fought to stay on her feet, and her knees buckled as the bow of the boat smashed into the mud.

The frantic roar of ratcheting gears and cogs echoed all around them. Massive chunks of slimy brown mud cartwheeled overhead, but by blind luck or design, not a sliver of it came on board. With the lake aft of them, Suzy tacked up the embankment for at least another mile before coming to a graceful and perfect stop right beside an old neglected wooden pier.

Suzy's gears and cogs wound down and fell silent.

Rachel couldn't believe what her mother had just done (and her mother's driving instructor, Mr Cross, wouldn't have believed it, either.)

'Marks out of ten?' Lorraine called out from the bottom rung of the wheelhouse ladder. 'Not bad parking if I do say so myself,' she added and walked towards them with Lydia by her side, who couldn't stop grinning.

'Eleven out of ten,' Larry cheered back.

Rachel went up to her mother and said, 'That was incredible, Mum.'

Lorraine managed a cheeky smile. 'So, Rachel – I take it there won't be any more funny remarks about the local wildlife running for cover when I'm out driving with Mr Cross?' she said frivolously.

'Oh, you heard that did you?' she said sheepishly, her face flushing with embarrassment. 'Well, Dad laughed as well,' she added quickly, attempting to put part of the blame on her father, who really should have set an example for his only child.

'How did you get Suzy to drop her keels?' Larry asked Lorraine. 'I was led to believe the gearing mechanism was damaged beyond repair.'

Lorraine went strangely quiet. 'Um – Suzy told me,' she replied with a nervous laugh and reached into her handbag.

They exchanged worried glances as she rummaged.

'I asked her about the strange compass – and then suddenly, a book fell from the shelves above me and into my hands,' added Lorraine hotly.

'Now, strike me down with a bowling ball,' Larry exclaimed in astonishment. 'I haven't seen that book in years.'

Lorraine placed the book into Larry's twitching fingers. With a deep intake of breath, he opened the battered book with Rachel leaning in close, but her face scrunched up as a nasty whiff of stale mildew wafted up her nostrils, and she had to stifle the start of a sneeze.

Disregarding the half-ripped blank pages at the beginning of the book, Larry skimmed through the rest of the pages whose immaculate handwritten words adorned every page; however, in contrast, scrawling scarlet lines of crossed-writing embellished the first chapter heading.

Larry looked up from the book, still grinning from ear to ear. 'This is Professor Shire's book all right – I thought I recognised the cover and Thomas' neat handwriting,' he explained, thumbing through the other crinkled pages. 'It's his notes for the Mud Skipper – for Suzy.'

'Look at page twelve,' Lorraine told him assertively. 'I followed the instructions to the letter, flipped a couple of switches on the dashboard and bashed the compass three times like it said, and the keels fell down.'

'I see what you mean,' Larry enthused, placing the book into Rachel's patient outstretched hands. 'I wonder who wrote the crossed-writing,' he added with a thoughtful but curious undertone.

Rachel stared at the writing. At first, she thought her grandmother had penned the untidy scrawl, but by the writer's shaky slant, it occurred to her the handwriting appeared hurried, almost desperate, and a shiver ran down her spine as she read the prose out for all to hear:

*'Beyond the oceans of the Remorrah, The Scarlet Lady drifts alone.
Broken by time's eternal curse, she withers not. Unanchored by fate, the
chains weigh heavy on her heart as eternity beckons.'*

An uncomfortable eerie silence lingered as they digested the odd haunting words. Rachel decided to keep what little she knew about the *Remorrah* and *The Scarlet Lady* to herself (at least for now).

'Well, I know one thing's for sure,' said Larry. '*The Scarlet Lady* hasn't drifted on *any* ocean in a very long time.'

'How d'you know that?' Rachel quizzed him.

Larry chuckled and stepped to one side. Lydia groaned but grinned.

'Rachel – may I present...' Larry said theatrically, bowing and then grabbing one end of a bulky green tarpaulin, '*The Scarlet Lady*.'

Rachel felt as cold as ice as Larry yanked at the obstinate tarpaulin. Her heightened senses cascaded through her body and danger seeped in through every pore on her pale skin.

'Damn thing's stuck on...' Larry muttered under his breath and gave the tarpaulin an almighty tug.

Rachel acted instinctively. Her eyesight blurred as her shoes took flight, and before she knew it, she had rugby-tackled Larry into a pile of lobster baskets just as an almighty crashing noise reached her ears.

Winded, dazed and somewhat confused as he caught his breath, Larry stared at Rachel through a set of wooden bars. Unhurt by her rash action, she went to pull him out of his predicament, but she felt a pair of hands pulling her up and back onto her trembling legs.

'Rachel – are you all right?' Lorraine asked.

'I think so,' she replied shakily, but her body throbbed excruciatingly.

Lydia wrenched the lobster basket off Larry's head. 'Larry would have been killed if it wasn't for your quick thinking, Rachel.'

Rachel gave them a confused look, but realisation soon dawned on her as her eyes followed the trail of splintered wood that lay across the deck. Partly covered with a ripped tarpaulin, an old clinker rowing boat rolled gently from side to side, held aloft by a single rope pulley. Right above and behind the wheelhouse, a black smoke-stained sign said:

LIFEBOAT: PLEASE KEEP EXITS CLEAR

Rachel took in the boat's weathered hull; a dull brass nameplate clung onto the wood with just a couple of corroded rivets and a piece of gum. *The Scarlet Lady* now had a gaping hole in its side from the untimely fall.

Lydia pulled Larry to his feet.

Larry faced filled with gratitude. 'Now, it's my turn to thank you for saving my life,' he told Rachel humbly, but he gave her a funny look. 'How on earth did you know the rope pulley was going to break?'

'Her exceptional hearing would be my guess,' Lorraine interjected with a broad smile. 'That's why she's so good at eavesdropping.'

'Well, Rachel – I've never seen reflexes like yours before,' said Larry, sounding impressed. 'With speed like that, I'll wager you're the fastest athlete at school?' he added admiringly.

Lorraine let out a stunted cough. 'Rachel's never been interested in school sports,' she told Larry flatly. 'Mind you, after what I've just seen, I think she should enter Plums' Egg and Spoon race.'

Rachel's jaw plummeted. '*You can't be serious, Mum,*' she told her.

Lorraine's face took on a devilish demeanour. 'You'll be eleven by then, and anyway, someone needs to wipe that insufferable smug smile off Mrs Asquith-Wells' pompous face,' she added snidely. 'Her daughter, Penelope, hasn't lost a single Egg and Spoon race yet.'

Rachel sighed. She knew all too well, she had inherited her father's acumen for sport, and as those fledgeling weeks at Plums had flown by, it had been evident to her sporting coach that Miss Rachel Cook had no athletic abilities, whatsoever. Her coach had finally abandoned her with a medicine ball, so at least she could scrape a pass in the subject.

Larry stepped towards the listing lifeboat. 'Sorry, old girl,' he said apologetically. 'That's a nasty gash you have there.'

'Can you fix *The Scarlet Lady*?' Rachel asked him.

'No,' said Larry glumly, 'and she's going to need a ship's carpenter to fix that gaping hole in her side –'

They all jumped backwards in alarm: a hefty pile of broken bric-a-brac, blankets and old lifejackets fell through the newly made hole of the lifeboat. Dinner plates spun but soon broke into smithereens, and pitiful squeaking noises arose from within the folds of the blanketed wool.

Lydia edged forwards and knelt down beside lumpiest blanket that wriggled about; she unfolded the musty wool and smiled: two bundles of black fluff made their appearance and poked their inquisitive heads out.

'Now then, would you take a look at that,' Larry chortled. 'Looks like we have a couple of stowaways on board.'

'These kittens only look a few days old,' said Lydia pensively. 'I bet their mother's out looking for them right now.'

'They must be older than that,' Rachel told Lydia, kneeling down beside her. 'Look – their eyes are just beginning to open – *oh, one of the kittens' ears is missing!*'

'Can you see any blood? Maybe it's been injured,' Larry suggested.

'I can't tell with all the fuzzy fur,' Rachel replied and slowly reached her hand out towards the kittens. The one-eared kitten hesitated for a moment, but it meowed and rubbed her hand with its head. The other

kitten, however, hissed and spat back at her; it slowly crept back, cowered down and glared back at her with venomous, unblinking eyes.

With a gentle touch, Rachel swept the one-eared kitten into her arms, but the other cat hunkered down and growled threateningly at her, its scowling face full of rising spite and fury. The one-eared kitten purred away as she rubbed under its chin, but she couldn't see any signs of injury, so she gathered the kitten was born without a right ear.

'So, what are we going to do with these two, love,' Larry asked Lydia.

'Well, you're going to put the lifeboat back together as best you can,' she told him firmly, 'and then we're going to put the kittens back into the blanket, and hopefully their mother will come looking for them when we get Suzy back to port.'

'And if not,' Larry hinted.

'Then, we'll have to find them a new home,' Lydia replied.

'Mum – d'you think we could give Flotsam a home if its mother doesn't turn up?' asked Rachel cajolingly, smiling down at the contented kitten as it purred even louder on hearing its newly appointed name.

Lorraine hadn't heard her: lost in thought, she had stooped down to retrieve the remains of a shattered plate that had landed at her feet. Now filthy from the engrained dust, her once elegant ruby painted fingernails slowly arranged the largest pieces of chipped China into the palm of her hand, and she suddenly let out a muffled cry of pain.

'Mum – what's the matter?'

Lorraine hid the shattered plate, 'Oh, everything's fine – I just have some dust in my eyes – that's all – now, what's this about a kitten?'

CHAPTER SIX

Craspedacusta Carcer

Rachel prayed her mother would see sense about keeping Flotsam. By the tone of her distracted reply, she felt she had at least a chance to keep the one-eared kitten as a pet. However, convincing her father was a different matter entirely, as he disliked cats as much as he disliked Mr Lovejoy, his overbearing, self-righteous, pompous boss.

Rachel felt stifling in the confines of the claustrophobic cabin, so she quickly made a beeline towards the deck to get some fresh air; she rested her arms on the rusty guardrail and peered inland. In the far distance, a smattering of black mountains rose up; closer to home, fertile forests smothered the undulating hills that seemed to go on forever and a day.

'C'mon, Rachel – the kitchen won't clean itself,' Lorraine hollered from down below decks. *'Lydia's busy mopping out the bilge, so Larry needs a helping hand with the washing up.'*

'I'll – I'll be down soon,' she replied, but her mind was elsewhere.

'Well, don't be too long,' Lorraine added. *'Idle hands and all that...'*

So much for the exciting trip to the park, Rachel thought, but her spirits lifted as the cacophony of nature reached her ears. *For the first time in ages, she felt a definite air of excitement. She felt that somewhere on the island, an adventure was calling her, and that adventure wouldn't involve scrubbing the deck, clearing the kitchen table or doing the washing up.*

With the stench of bleach, vinegar and lemon wafting up from the bowels of the boat, she made a snap decision and decided to make herself scarce, so she disembarked down the creaky gangplank and left the chores in the grownups' capable hands.

* * *

Rachel stood at the end of the pier and spotted a sandbar nearby. Leaving Suzy far behind, she ploughed through the dense bulrushes. Barely five minutes had passed, when she wondered if she should just give it up and turn back; however, her nostrils smelt something that had no right to be there and headed towards the strong salty smell. Pulling bits of bulrush out of her hair and spitting out the rest, she found herself staring down into a colossal crater of rolling sand dunes, made up of mossy half-sunken gravestones that surrounded the tranquil pool at its centre.

Rachel stumbled down the cumbersome embankment. Weaving her way in between the gravestones, she approached the pool and wondered

why this body of water smelt so strongly of salt, as one of the largest freshwater lakes in the country surrounded her. Over to her right, a brass-buttoned grey overcoat hung over the tallest gravestone. With her curiosity piqued, she pushed the overcoat aside and tried to read what was left of the sandblasted slab of rock:

We did not hunger for death or the manner in which we met it... We alone must atone for the tragedy that tore us apart... eternity beckons...

Rachel wondered if the other weathered epitaphs would make any more sense, but as she turned her back on the pool, a sudden slurping sound distracted her. Her head spun around, and with her eyes peeled, they hunted for the source of the peculiar noise.

A brief gust of wind drove a fine white mist in her direction, and in an instant, her eyes stung, welling up with water as an unadulterated salty mist overpowered her sense of smell.

Ripples of concentric waves lapped against the pool's crusty-white shoreline, but then, a plopping noise emanated from its centre, and her heart skipped a beat as a wild orchid bobbed to the surface; her favourite flower spun around in the pool, propelled clockwise by the featherweight wind. Overcome with sheer delight, she bounded over towards the pool and quickly knelt down. With giddy excitement on seeing her favourite flower, she plucked the orchid from out of the stirring water.

The water level rose rapidly and soaked the hemline of her dress.

With a slithering swiftness, the orchid soared above the surface and contracted itself around her right hand, and she let out a deafening cry. The intense throbbing pain threatened to overwhelm her. Wracked by so much pain, she almost fell headfirst into the pool as the flower dived back into the watery depths, taking her hand with it. Fighting back her fear, she tried to pull her right hand out of the water with her left.

The strong salty water burned her warty wound, and droplets of blood stained the unblemished pool.

To her relief, the orchid's slimy tendrils released her right hand, but they slithered and spun rapidly around her left – crushing her wound. With her strength sapping away, she used her right hand to free her left, but to her horror, steel vice-like fingers wrenched her right hand away with vigorous resolve and plunged her left completely underwater.

Right behind her, a man's voice thick with desperation, bellowed, 'YOU MUST FIGHT IT UNDERWATER!'

Through blurry eyes, Rachel cried, *'Let go – you're hurting me.'*

The man ignored her. He forced her right hand behind her back and gripped her left wrist even tighter. *'HOW OLD ARE YOU?'* he demanded.

'I-I don't understand,' Rachel blubbered.

'QUICKLY – TELL ME YOUR AGE?'

'I'm ten,' Rachel blurted out.

'Then we still have a chance,' he said gravely. *'What's your name?'* he added frantically, his firm grip unyielding as he pulled her closer to him.

'R-Rachel,' she replied through the unrelenting pain.

'Now listen to me, Rachel – you've been poisoned!'

'P-p-poisoned by what?' she stammered, gasping for air.

'Craspedacusta Carcer,' he replied with an edge of foreboding riding his fearful reply. *'A particularly nasty jellyfish – and fatal to –'*

Rachel collapsed into a heap. Her dazed stupor ended as an obnoxious smell brought her back to her senses.

'Rachel – wake up,' the man snapped.

'Let me sleep,' she said droopily. *'Just let me sleep.'*

The man shook her awake. Her pain melded into a dull ache that throbbed through her warty hand. The pool suddenly rippled as if it had just shivered from the cold.

'Tell me, Rachel – what do you see in the pool?'

A shock of ginger hair coalesced right in front of her, and she recoiled in horror as an auburn apparition slowly transformed into a young girl. Wave upon wave of fear and shame flooded her senses; and for a fleeting moment, she prayed the physical pain would return.

'Rachel – what do you see in the pool?' he demanded at once.

'A girl – a young schoolgirl,' she answered timidly.

'Who is she?'

Rachel didn't want to answer his question. *'I don't know,'* she lied.

'The jellyfish poison running through your veins seeks out your darkest secrets and relives them one by one,' he hissed into her ear. *'The poison rallies your fears and uses them against you. Little by little, piece by piece, the poison destroys you from within. Lying will do you no good.'*

Rachel swallowed.

'Unless you face your daemon now – you will surely die!' he added resolutely, his portentous demand laced with abject resolve.

'Her name is Alice – Alice Winterbright,' Rachel said at last.

Alice's apparition splashed across the pool and into Rachel's blood.

'Rachel, do you know why she's in the poison pool?'

‘Yes...’ she choked and thought about Alice, her best friend.

* * *

The two of them met at Plums’ Preparatory. However, Alice’s father lost his government job, and he could no longer afford her private school fees anymore, so she continued her education at Gravelings, and that’s when they began to lose touch. Rachel knew all too well she was to blame for their waning friendship. A year later and what with new friends knocking on her door, Alice Winterbright had become a mere afterthought.

But on one miserable dull day in autumn, Rachel’s school friends had interrupted her frantic Latin revision and dragged her over to Gravelings.

By the school gates, schoolchildren shouted, ‘FIGHT!’ repeatedly.

Rachel didn’t want to be there, but Jenny Marsh grabbed her purple tie and pulled her through the crowd like a horse. By the roadside, a bloodied blonde-headed girl hung onto another girl’s leg and bit down hard into her ham-sized ankle. The girl’s massive frame crashed to the tarmac, and she stayed put, reeling in agony as she clutched her injured ankle and wailed. Gravelings’ schoolchildren whooped and cheered, but their excitement ended abruptly, as another ginormous girl came out of nowhere and body slammed the blonde-headed girl over a stumpy wall.

Schoolchildren rushed over and peered over the low wall. Silence and then laughter filled the air as the blonde-headed schoolgirl crawled out of the muddy pool and onto the sandbags that had broken her fall.

Rachel hadn’t laughed at all: the bottle blonde-headed girl’s green eyes stared back at her with shame. In her dripping wet school uniform, Alice Winterbright reached out with a ripped sleeve and bruised hand, but Rachel averted her eyes in disgust.

How could Alice degrade herself like this, Rachel thought.

Alice’s apparition sank beneath the pool and vanished with a plop.

The man let out a heavy sigh and released his grip.

Rachel heard him get up, but as she tried to pull her left hand out of the pool, it wouldn’t budge and sheer panic set in. ‘*My hand’s still stuck in the pool!*’ she cried out in desperation.

The man’s hand rested lightly on her shoulder, and she felt his hot breath against her ear as he whispered, ‘*I’m sorry, Rachel – but you must face your daemon alone.*’

'Please don't leave me,' she pleaded, but she knew the man had already gone, leaving her entirely alone with nothing but fear and regret.

The pool's water churned.

Rachel's body wasn't her own anymore, and she groaned as her face began to swell up. Blood trickled out of her sore nose and down over her cut lip. Bruises spread across her pale skin, and as her body soaked up Alice's physical pain, the pool's surface slowly turned crystal clear.

Scores of baying schoolchildren pointed at her from out of the pool's reflection; their cruel laughter and jeers filled her with nothing but self-pity and loathing as Alice's humiliation flowed through her veins.

On the other side of the road, a young boy sped along the pavement and yelled, '*Alice, stay right there – I'm coming over.*'

Rachel stared spellbound into the pool and at the boy who darted across the road. Her past came to the fore, and she fought hard to forget the remorseful memory, but the screeching of tyres and the sickening thud ended that unwanted thought.

The boy's twisted torso rolled into the litter-strewn gutter.

Rachel felt the full force of Alice's horror, and she reached out with her hand, screaming, '*Jacob!*'

The schoolchildren piled over the wall and ran towards the injured boy who lay as still as a rock...

* * *

Rachel's tears fell down her cheeks and into the churning pool. As the image of Jacob faded, her left hand came free, and she quickly scurried backwards. The pool gurgled loudly for a few seconds and then made an unnerving sucking sound as a whirlpool rippled into existence.

With Larry's account of dangerous whirlpools popping up all over the place, she got up and smartly leapt back out of harm's way.

As the water whooshed down the pool's sinkhole, she heard a familiar voice bellow, '*RACHEL – OH, THERE YOU ARE.*'

Managing to raise a faint smile, she waved back at Larry's relieved face. Feeling her strength returning, she inspected her left hand and the rest of her body. Her latent injuries had all but vanished, and even her warts had disappeared, leaving only a faint outline of an untidy scar.

'IT'S OK, LORRAINE – I'VE FOUND RACHEL BY THE GRAVESTONES,' Larry shouted over his shoulder and trundled towards her. 'No wonder we couldn't see you down here – didn't you hear us calling you?'

'Oh, I must have dozed off,' Rachel fibbed, wiping her tears away with the back of her hand and feigning a sleepy yawn. 'It must have been that English fry up that made me take forty winks – I'm still stuffed.'

'Well, your mother's having kittens,' Larry informed her. 'She's been worried sick about you disappearing like that,' he added chidingly, but his discourse petered out as his curious eyes fell on the desiccated pool.

Rachel mirrored his gaze.

'My word – would you take a look at that,' Larry squeaked. 'I've never seen the like,' he added and edged towards the pool.

Rachel gulped. Larry knelt down beside the gelatinous lump that had caught his eye: a large jellyfish wobbled by the bank.

'Careful, Larry, that jellyfish looks dangerous,' squawked Rachel nervously as she took in its bloodied fringe-like tentacles that extended from its bloated bell-shaped body.

'The freshwater jellyfish in these waters aren't dangerous. In fact, it's very rare you see them at all,' he said with intense interest. 'Mind you – I've never seen one as big as this before. Maybe it's this damn heatwave that's bringing them to the surface,' he added musingly and picked up a knurled and knotted stick off the bleached-white sand by the pool. He gave her a reassuring smile and then prodded the jellyfish with the stick, but it didn't react, so he prodded the jellyfish a little bit harder.

'D'you think it's dead?' Rachel asked Larry as it hadn't budged at all.

Larry chewed his lower lip. 'Hmmm... seems like it,' he pondered, 'but maybe it's just playing possum – you know – faking death.'

Rachel nodded. The jellyfish appeared dead out of the water, but she knew what its poison could do: she had faced her only daemon, but she couldn't imagine what it would be like to face a lifetime of them.

The stranger knew about the poison pool. *Who was he and where did he go? Larry hadn't mentioned seeing the man when they were out looking for her.*

'Best we leave it well alone, eh?' Larry told her straight. 'I don't know what it is – but that's no gimballled jellyfish.'

Scuffling noises reached their ears. 'Oh, there you are,' Lorraine spluttered and slid down the sloping embankment with little difficulty. 'We've been calling you for ages, Rachel – where have –?'

'– She's been fast asleep,' Larry interjected.

'It must be the invigorating air,' added Rachel, but her demeanour changed as she marched up to her mother. 'Mum, I've had a long think, and – and I've decided I don't want to be a Prefect anymore.'

'What's brought this on, Rachel?'

'I'm just not cut out for the job – and I don't think I ever was,' she said firmly. 'Alice Winterbright should've been Prefect – not me.'

Lorraine pursed her lips and said, 'All right, I'll talk to Miss Pritchard about it next week – I'm sure she'll understand.'

Miss Lucinda Pritchard would understand perfectly, Rachel thought, and in a heartbeat, her headmistress would offer Miss Penelope Asquith-Wells her coveted position of youngest Prefect at Plums.

Larry gave them such a broad smile, they thought his face would split open. 'Speaking of Miss Winterbright,' he beamed. 'Alice told me she was heartbroken at leaving Plums – but she's finally settled in at Gravelings.'

'Have they stopped bullying her?' Rachel asked, almost whispering.

'Oh, I don't think anyone's going to bully Gravelings' new Head Girl!'

Rachel couldn't believe what she had just heard.

'B-but – but she's Rachel's age,' Lorraine told Larry.

'She's the youngest Head Girl they've ever appointed,' he replied.

'Well deserved Alice,' said Rachel, heartfelt on hearing the news.

'Alice and her parents came down for a visit,' Larry informed them.

'We all went out on Suzy – you know – to celebrate the good news.'

'I bet Alice's mother didn't steer Suzy?' said Rachel, raising a smile.

'Talking of steering,' Lorraine harrumphed, returning her daughter's smile. 'I think we better get a move on and steer ourselves away from this beach. We've spent quite enough time here already – and there's still a fair amount of walking to do before we get to the signpost.'

'Er – hadn't we better be heading back to Suzy?' chimed Larry. 'Lydia will be wondering where we've got –'

'– Lydia will be fine,' interrupted Lorraine. 'She told me she wanted everyone out of the way, so she can scrub the upper deck in peace.'

Still feeling guilty about not helping with the chores, Rachel followed the pair of them out of the sand dunes towards a flint-walled footpath, but she had an uncontrollable urge to face the poison pool one last time.

Her eyes squinted as she fought the bright sunlight, but there was no mistake: the grey overcoat and jellyfish had vanished; and to her utter astonishment, a pair of brown boots and gingham socks now lay at the foot of the tallest gravestone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Sign of the Times

The brown eagle circled its prey with practised ease; it disregarded the three figures that traipsed over a steep hillock as it dived to make the kill. A sudden scream shattered the valley's lulling quietness. The eagle's talons missed its prey by a hair's breadth and caught something else.

Slumbering creatures never heard or saw the eagle thrash about in terror as it soared skyward into the deep blue sky.

Larry let out another sneeze that seemed to break the sound barrier. He wiped his runny nose on his sleeves and rolled them up his arms – oblivious to the eagle directly overhead and the angry wasps' nest that had just missed his slick perspiring head.

Lorraine gave Larry a look of utter disgust, then averted her eyes and stared down into the valley with grim determination.

Rachel followed her mother's gaze. 'Are we there yet?' she sniggered.

Lorraine beamed and said, 'Yes, Rachel – I do believe we are.'

'Thank goodness for that,' Larry groaned.

Rachel roasted under the heat of the day and took in the uninspiring vista of uninteresting rolling hills that surrounded them and followed her mother for at least another mile. The sharp flint walls that bordered the footpath had long since crumbled away into piles of weathered rocks.

Rachel sped ahead. With her renewed vigour, her heavy backpack hadn't slowed her down at all, and she easily kept up with her mother's long strides. Larry, however, had fallen behind after the first mile or so, but he had put on a brave face as they waited for him to catch up.

'What's that up ahead?' Rachel inquired.

'Our first port of call,' Lorraine replied.

'Now, that's a welcoming sight,' Larry puffed, clapping his eyes on the wooden bench in front of them and not the tall tree beyond.

Lorraine, however, had clapped her hands with childlike glee. 'We can't stop yet, Larry,' she blustered. 'There will be plenty of time for a rest when we get to the signpost,' she added hurriedly and shot off along the footpath, ignoring his grumpy demeanour and disgruntled retort.

Rachel grinned and said, 'C'mon, Larry – let's get after her.'

'I wish I'd stayed behind on Suzy and helped Lydia tidy up,' he griped and began rubbing his spindly legs to get some feeling back into them. 'You know, I'm getting too old for all these adventures.'

'I can give you a piggy-back ride if you want?' Rachel snorted.

Larry gave her an endearing smile. 'That won't be necessary,' he said breezily, squaring his shoulders. 'I think there's still plenty of life in the old dog yet,' he added with a merry wink and marched ahead.

* * *

By the time they had finally caught up with Lorraine, the main footpath had long since disappeared. They crunched their way through leaves, twigs and other bits of dead fauna that lay underfoot.

Much to Larry's dismay, they had come across the wooden bench, but it had succumbed to the ravages of time and the inclement weather that plagued the glade they were now trudging through, so he quickened his pace and made his way over towards the carved rock chairs up ahead.

Covered with bits of brown bark, crinkly dry leaves and a veil of strange greyish powder, the rock chairs surrounded the altitudinous tree.

Rachel brushed a seat clean, removed her backpack and collapsed into the closest rock chair with an uncomfortable hard bump; with the cooling effect of the rock against her skin, she closed her eyes and breathed in the refreshing pine air that swirled mindlessly all around her.

Ten chairs away, Lorraine said nothing, as she was too preoccupied staring up at the Scots Pine as if it had some hypnotic hold over her.

Rachel stretched her arms high over her head and yawned. 'What's Mum doing?' she asked Larry with an enquiring undertone.

Larry opened his mouth, but he must have thought better of it as he mulled her question over. 'Searching for Serendipity,' he replied at last.

'But you don't search for –' Rachel began, but her mother shot to her feet and rushed over towards them, her face full of unbridled anguish.

'Larry – we need to talk,' Lorraine told him heatedly. 'Alone, if you wouldn't mind, Rachel,' she added a little too forcefully, but she quickly mouthed a *'please'* with a warm smile that she needed some privacy.

'OK, OK – I know when I'm not wanted,' she told her mother offhandedly and headed towards the tall tree in search of Serendipity.

* * *

Rachel took her own sweet time and trudged in between the mishmash of roots that grew thicker as she made her way towards the towering

tree. As her boredom grew, she had a silly childish thought and acted upon it: using roots as imaginary courts, she played Hopscotch for a minute or two before stopping mid hop, as she heard an odd rustling sound coming from behind. Whirling around, she watched the foliage part as something headed towards the tree at a tremendous rate of knots.

Smitten with inquisitiveness, she tried her hardest to head off the speedy something that was in an all fire hurry.

Rachel chided herself as the white something leapt effortlessly into the dense foliage and disappeared up the tree trunk in less than a blink of an eye, but she hadn't hesitated and launched herself right after it.

Standing on a sturdy branch, she waited for the speedy something to make a move, but she didn't have to wait long as dried twigs and cones bounced irritatingly off the top of her head.

Rachel caught the flash of a white something as it broke cover. She gave chase and followed its lead as it leapt from branch to branch...

With her vim and vigour flagging to almost exhaustion, Rachel took a breather but heard nothing above her rasping breaths. As the unnatural silence seemed to smother her, slithers of sunlight shone through the murky darkness, and she spotted something amiss. Her eyes narrowed to slits as she peered up at the splintered branch that wasn't a branch.

Rachel gripped the tinder-dry vines, and as she ripped them apart, their layers of musty bark crumbled away, and the branch that wasn't a branch transformed into a five-fingered metal plate.

Her body shivered from top to toe as she rapped the plate with her knuckle, and she felt as if her kidneys had caught a mild case of frostbite. Aided by the sickly sunlight, she could just make out the raised black words on the grubby white plate:

Oyster Bay (Mother of Pearls)

Heed your greed and take only what's agreed 1

Bursting with excited expectation, she pulled herself up the trunk and exposed another branch, squinting as the sunlight faded even further:

The Nook & Cranny Public House

It's your round, again and again 3

Pushed skywards by the Scots Pine, she had found her mother's secret signpost that almost touched the sky.

SQUEAK! SQUEAK!

With renewed vigour, Rachel climbed skywards towards the shrill sound, and in no time at all, she had found herself out in the brisk open air and gazed at the scores of wispy white clouds, which whisked their way hurriedly across the powdery blue sky.

Towards the hazy horizon, she scrutinised the range of blurry black mountains. At first, she thought the clouds were distorting her view of the island, but this seemed different somehow; she slowly spun around, but to her chagrin, her eyesight remained slightly out-of-focus.

Her eyesight couldn't be at fault, she thought, as she could always read the bottom of the optician's eye chart without so much of a squint.

'Rachel – where are you? Chop, chop – we're leaving soon...'

Rachel looked down at the two specs far below; her stomach lurched, as she hadn't realised how far up she had travelled up the tree trunk.

Averting her gaze from the sickening sight, she slowly stepped back and bumped into the signpost with a clang, but a pitiful squeak distracted her from the throbbing pain down her spine and the headache in the back of her head. The white something slunk out from beneath the signpost's circular capstan, whose words offered a definite challenge:

The Sign of the Times

Follow me if you dare

The albino squirrel met her gaze and twitched its whiskers.

'Hello, there,' she cooed, trying hard not to scare the timid creature. *'I've never seen an albino squirrel before,'* she added brightly.

The squirrel's dull pink eyes studied her with trepidation; it seemed hesitant about the newcomer who had tailed it to its tall dray. It looked very gaunt and malnourished as if it hadn't had a decent meal in weeks.

Rachel snuck her hand into her pocket but found only lint and a paltry handful of peanuts that she had half-inched from her mother using sleight of hand, which amazed her as she didn't know any magical tricks.

'Here you go,' said Rachel, offering the squirrel a peanut.

The squirrel leant forward and gave it a swift suspicious sniff as its insatiable hunger overpowered its natural fear, but as it took another furtive sniff, it backed away, losing all interest in the salty legume.

‘Don’t like salt, eh?’ Rachel remarked, licked the peanut completely clean and offered it back. ‘Here you go – salt-free this time.’

With desperate eyes, it craned its neck and sniffed once more, and the peanut vanished from the palm of her hand – and under her nose!

‘How on earth did you manage to do that?’ Rachel squawked, looking utterly gobsmacked. ‘I never saw you move –’

The squirrel munched no more: it let out a terrifying screech and clutched at its furry stomach with its haggard paws. Its eyes welled up, and tears ran down its hollow cheeks – matting its filthy fur. The squirrel hacked up a lung as it tried desperately to get the peanut out of its throat.

Rachel panicked and reached out towards the stricken squirrel, but it stumbled, startled by her lunging hand, then tumbled towards terra firma with the bag of peanuts trailing closely behind.

She spun around and slid down the signpost – dropping like a stone.

Her hands burned until she dug her heels hard against the trunk and jumped onto the nearest branch, hoping it would hold her weight. Way out of her depth and out on a limb, she dodged the bag of peanuts as they plummeted past her head at an incredible rate.

With a flash of white above her, she reached out, plucked the squirrel from out of the air and stared broken hearted down at its battered body.

‘*Wake up – wake up,*’ Rachel cried, but the squirrel’s body stayed limp and unmoving apart from its straggly tail that swished back and forth in the wind. Her heart filled with sorrow. ‘*I’m so sorry, Serendipity –*’

Suddenly, every branch she could see quivered. Her body tingled with static electricity, as an invisible puppeteer plucked at her black hair and whipped the strands into a frenzied dance. Disorientated by the whirring sounds of so many mechanical cogs churning and turning, she felt quite lightheaded as the unrelenting cogs pummelled her eardrums.

Rachel felt something – something bad was about to happen –

Her stomach ended up in her chest. The branch beneath her feet had dropped and swung clockwise. With perfect balance, she landed on the branch directly below it. As she pushed Serendipity into her pocket, she jumped towards the rusty metal trunk and hugged it.

The loud clanking sounds shook her body so violently, she wondered if her skin would slide off. A tsunami of dead foliage came crashing down right over her head and shoulders. Shaking her head free of debris, she managed to spit most of the detritus out of her mouth.

As the sun bathed her in a blaze of dazzling light, she watched in utter astonishment as the trunk’s remaining bark cracked and crumbled

away, leaving hundreds of five-fingered signs shaking as they folded themselves away into the thick metallic trunk.

Rachel ducked: the sign above her head had almost decapitated her.

Right below her, vibrating signs rotated like propeller blades. There was nothing for it, and she leapt onto the sign below and kept on going, facing sign after rotating sign, but against all the odds, her uncanny balancing skill had kept her upright as the ground drew nearer...

With the coffee-coloured ground less than twenty feet below her, she swung off the last sign in too much haste and tumbled into a deep pile of mouldy bark. Extricating herself out of the pongy pile, she rolled over, wiped her face with her dirty sleeve and saw an enormous umbrella with a couple of concerned faces staring down her dishevelled state.

'And where have you been hiding?' Lorraine demanded.

'As if we couldn't guess,' added Larry mirthfully and pulled her off the ground. 'Looks like you've been pulled through a hedge backwards.'

Rachel spat out a twig. 'Um – I've been exploring –' she began.

'*I don't believe it,*' Lorraine exclaimed, folding her umbrella away.

'Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle,' Larry put in.

Rachel whizzed around on the spot. With surprise and wonder, she stared in amazement at the signpost that had collapsed down to about six feet. The five-fingered sign spun around like a wayward weathervane until it finally shuddered to a hissing halt – expelling its residual steam.

Lorraine let out a gasp of surprise. '*Isn't the destination wonderful?*' she sniffed joyously. '*I knew the signpost wouldn't let me down.*'

Rachel read the signpost's destination that pointed to an avenue of golden willows that she was adamant weren't there a moment ago:

Inklings Lighthouse

Let this folly be your gilded cage

By Larry's sullen demeanour, he didn't seem too enamoured with the destination either and let out a pained sigh.

Lorraine placed Rachel's backpack into her willing arms.

'The lighthouse better be worth the walk –' Rachel began, but her neck hairs twitched and began to tickle. The intense tickling sensation became an irritating itch, and a sliver of fear ran down her spine, as something soft and fluffy kept brushing up and down her neck.

Lorraine and Larry's eyes grew as wide as dinner plates.

Frozen to the spot, Rachel went to open her mouth, but Larry pressed his finger to his lips, shook his head and inched his way towards her.

Larry made no sound as he drew close and with one swift movement, he lunged at the nape of her neck. *'Got ya – you little critter,'* he yelled triumphantly, wrestling a white whirlwind of fluff in his clenched hands. *'So, you thought you could stow away in Rachel's backpack, eh?'*

The maddening albino squirrel let out an earsplitting squeal as it tried to break free from Larry's indomitable clutches.

'Serendipity,' Rachel squeaked, her heart filling with pure joy, as she hadn't caused the squirrel's demise after all.

'Stop struggling,' Larry fumed.

'Serendipity's getting very annoyed, Larry – I think you better put the squirrel down,' Lorraine urged, but he wasn't in the mood to give in just yet, but almost at once, he let out a yelp and staggered back in shock.

'Get it off me – get it off me!' Larry screeched, but the squirrel's mouth bit down even harder on his reddening nose. He tripped over a root, and then another and toppled into a rather large stack of dead leaves.

Serendipity released its jaws and pirouetted on Larry's chest like a demented ballet dancer. It gave Rachel and Lorraine a toothy grin and scuttled away in the direction of the lighthouse.

'I've been mauled – mauled, I tell you,' Larry told Lorraine, who had just yanked him out of the leaves that had luckily broken his untimely fall. *'My nose – my nose – I can't feel my nose. That squirrel's gone and eaten my nose,'* he added wildly. *'There's blood – there's blood everywhere!'*

Lorraine exhaled with an exasperating huff. *'Now, don't be such a baby, Larry – there's not a drop of blood on you,'* she snapped irritably.

Rachel fought hard to keep a straight face.

'Serendipity's just numbed your nose – that's all, Lorraine added with a heavy sigh. *'Here – take my spare handkerchief and blow your nose. You should count yourself lucky it didn't take a bite out of you – scaring the poor creature like that. Right, if we're all fighting fit – may I suggest we follow in Serendipity's footsteps and head towards the golden willows before they all wither up and die in this unbearable heat!'*

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Whispering Willows

Nobody said a word as they made their way towards the golden willows. Lorraine seemed too preoccupied with her thoughts, but on a whim, she took off and raced ahead. Larry, however, appeared too irritated to utter a single word to any of them and sweated buckets, dragging his heels and occasionally stopping to make sure his nose was still there.

Rachel licked her lips. Her idle thoughts conjured up all manner of drinks that would satisfy her insatiable thirst, and she breathed a sigh of relief as the train of golden willows smothered her in leafy shadows.

‘WE’LL BE IN THE SHADE FOR A BIT,’ shouted Lorraine, hitting her heel against the thickest trunk, trying to get bits of bark out of her shoe.

‘I bet my sandwiches have curled up at the ends by now,’ trilled Larry irritably, mopping his clammy brow with Lorraine’s flora handkerchief.

Rachel glanced over Larry’s shoulder, but the signpost wasn’t there.

As he coughed and spluttered his way towards her, she just realised what had been nagging her all along: the five-fingered sign hadn’t displayed the number of miles to the lighthouse – she was sure of it!

With little enthusiasm, Rachel and Larry followed Lorraine along the tightly packed avenue of golden willows. After a couple of hundred steps, the meandering avenue gradually closed ranks and hemmed them in. They were out of the sun, but the stifling air still sapped their strength (and even Lorraine couldn’t muster her long determined strides).

The leaves swished to and thro, but no welcoming breeze came their way. Rachel found the incessant noise disturbing: she couldn’t get it out of her head the golden willows were whispering amongst themselves.

‘Look, what’s that up ahead?’ she asked, and but she soon recognised the long winding wooden staircase that loomed out of the gloom.

The golden willows petered out, and their claustrophobic walk ended as they reached the snaking staircase that hugged the chalk cliff face.

They plonked themselves down on the bottom rung of the wooden stairs and huddled under the humongous heart-shaped leaves that cast a welcoming shadow over them as they sat in silence and cooled down.

Lorraine turned and faced them. ‘C’mon – we’ve had enough rest,’ she said wearily. ‘We’ll never get to the lighthouse at this rate.’

Their backs protested, and their knees groaned as they got up.

Rachel had barely taken a step up the flight of stairs when she winced and grabbed the stair rail with her hand. Hopping on one foot, she said, ‘Mum – I’ll catch you up as soon as I get this splinter out of my foot.’

‘Don’t be too long,’ Lorraine replied. ‘We’ve still a hike ahead of us.’

With her shoe unbuckled and her sock removed, Rachel inspected her injured foot and pulled the offending sliver of wood from her big toe. Putting her sock and shoe back on, she tentatively put her weight on it and immediately felt an odd tingling sensation through her sole: it felt like someone was tickling her throbbing toe with a feather.

The tingling grew even more persistence as faint rhythmic vibrations rumbled up and down the stairs like a rolling wave.

Rachel brushed her hair aside and put her ear against the stair rail – KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Startled, she jumped back from the stair rail in shock.

The knocking noise intensified, sounding frantic in its pacing, but an anguished cry of despair rang out above her.

'My, God – what has he done?' Lorraine shrieked.

Rachel hobbled up the staircase as fast as she could, leaving the strange knocking far behind. She found Lorraine and Larry with furious faces as they overlooked the three deep ruts in the staircase.

Lorraine's face took on a look of horror and disbelief. Bending down on one knee, her hand trembled as she picked up a jagged piece of glass. With a sharp intake of breath, she shot to her feet in temper, almost cutting herself on the glinting shard of glass in her palm. She turned on her heels and rushed up the stairs, bellowing, *'MADELEINE'S MIRRORS!'*

Larry beckoned Rachel to follow him, and with his face awash with anger, he said, *'C'mon, Rachel – we've got to get to the lighthouse.'*

Rachel reached the last rung of the staircase with a pounding heart.

Lorraine stood motionless beside a gigantic siege gun. Home to a few malnourished mice, the gun's wooden wheels had sunk into the chalky soil along the wheel's iron banding that had long since corroded away.

In an icy temper, Lorraine hammered the barrel with a clenched fist, scattering the frightened mice to the four winds. *'What daemon drove Henry to do this?'* she spat venomously.

Rachel ambled towards her mother, weaving around the hundreds of sagging holes that devastated the rutted plateau. As she approached her mother, she looked far beyond the gun's barrel and at the horizon that harboured the shadowy outline of a town.

Larry looked ill at ease as he took in the devastation. *'I – I saw the flashes of light and heard the rumbles of thunder,'* Larry told Lorraine shamefully, *'but if I knew what Henry was after I would have –'*

'– you would've ended up in jail again,' interrupted Lorraine gravely, her lips quivering. *'Henry would be your judge, jury and executioner.'*

'Lucky for us he's only a judge now,' said Larry darkly.

'Once a judge – always a judge. It's in his blood to rise above us all,' seethed Lorraine in bitter contempt, as if she had bitten into a rather tart gooseberry. 'He's laid waste to what we all knew and loved.'

Larry threw open his leather-bound satchel and pulled out a battered brass spyglass. 'I can just make out the lighthouse –' he began, but he let out a stilted cry of rage, still not quite believing what his eyes already knew. '*The mirrors – they're – they're all gone!*'

Lorraine faced Larry with a look of utter despair. 'As soon as I stepped foot on the island, I knew something was wrong,' she told him soulfully.

'That town over there – what's it called?' asked Rachel inquisitively.

'It's the town of Little Inkling,' said Lorraine with a faraway look.

Dark brooding clouds rolled in from all points of the compass. To Rachel's relief, they blotted out the blue sky and the incessant sun.

'The sooner we get into town, the better,' said Larry bleakly. 'Looks like the weather's on the turn,' he added, and as if on cue, the weather went from slightly moody to downright miserable in a matter of minutes.

Lorraine reached into her handbag and handed out plastic ponchos.

Rachel wished she had her sou'wester hat, as the buffeting wind blew so hard it messed up her impeccable blunt haircut. With her head held down, she struggled against the elements and the soggy footpath...

* * *

'DON'T WALK ANOTHER STEP,' Larry bellowed.

'*What's the matter?*' asked Rachel, her left leg left hovering.

'Look down,' Larry answered.

Rachel carefully lowered her left leg and stepped back from the brown sludge in front of her. As the wind veered once more, her nose wrinkled in disgust. The overwhelming aroma of rancid decay and salt flooded her senses. The pelting rain soon dwindled down to an irritating drizzle.

Off into the middle distance, she could see the town's silhouette quite clearly beyond the vast open pits that littered the landscape.

Piles of mining equipment lay abandoned and rusting.

'Looks like Henry's roped in Bert Burrows to do his dirty work,' said Larry sneeringly, casting his tempestuous gaze over the mountainous mounds of earth and rock. 'He must have known what Henry was up to.'

‘The recriminations can wait,’ Lorraine said. ‘Henry’s got some hold over Bert. He’s no traitor – not after all we’ve been through.’

‘I don’t know which Silverback’s the worst,’ Larry snapped. ‘Wilfred has the brains – but Henry has power, money and oodles of cunning wit.’

Much to her chagrin, Rachel knew Henry Silverback all too well, as she had an unfortunate encounter with him at Plums.

In a desperate attempt to get to her Latin class on time, she had sped down the red-bricked archway and smacked into him so hard, it had rumpled his tweed jacket and knocked his tartan sporran out of sorts. Her pencil case had careered towards the vaulted ceiling, but it had come down twice as hard and hit Henry in the head, messing up the perfect parting in his slick jet-black hair.

Rachel’s pencil case had dropped right in front of his feet.

‘*One should always keep good care of their possessions,*’ Henry had told her, but his disdain had quickly dissolved into one of malice as he slowly crushed her pencil case with his brown brogue. With nothing but a cruel sneer, he had marched towards a shining silver Phantom Rolls Royce.

Rachel brushed the thought of that day aside. Her crushed pencil case seemed petty compared to Henry’s pernicious actions that lay before her.

‘Those cannonballs have done a right number on the lighthouse and the church’s spire,’ Larry scowled, seething as he put his spyglass away.

‘What drove Thomas to leave the island to Henry?’ snarled Lorraine.

Larry sighed. ‘What’s done is done,’ he said. ‘Let’s get moving, eh?’

Lorraine shrugged her shoulders but nodded in agreement.

In single file, they weaved in between the myriad of overflowing pits that smelt of rotten cabbages, smelly feet and just a hint of sour milk.

Rachel couldn’t take it anymore and almost suffocated herself with her handkerchief to lessen the awful smell wafting up her nostrils. With the odious pits behind them, they stood in front of a gigantic wooden gate that floundered precariously on its rusty hinges, and as far as the eye could see, enormous black boulders surrounded the town on all sides.

The town resembles a fortress, Rachel thought as her eyes scoured the murky scene. *All it needed was a massive moat to complete the picture.*

CHAPTER NINE

Pigeon Pie and Sprouts

The temperamental weather turned even nastier, and the skittish wind continued to hammer them from all sides. Thoroughly exhausted and almost beaten back, they struggled against the squall that tried to keep them at bay, but with grim determination, they slowly battled their way towards the black lighthouse that loomed out of the gloom.

* * *

Rachel, Larry and Lorraine huddled in the lighthouse's snug alcove. The noise from the wind and rain had vanished all at once, and the sudden quiet felt quite unsettling. Larry got to work and pulled the ivy away from the weather-beaten oak door that had probably seen better days.

'Now, Larry and I will go in first,' Lorraine told Rachel. 'Wait here until we've made sure that's it's safe for you to come inside.'

Rachel nodded, and her stomach let out a low desperate growl.

Lorraine reached for the plastic carrier bag that wasn't there. 'Oh, bother,' she said all in a fluster, 'Now, I'm a silly bee – I've gone and left our picnic bag back at the signpost.'

Rachel's stomach groaned in annoyance.

'Don't worry, Lorraine – all is not lost,' said Larry breathlessly, beads of sweat glistening on his dirty brow as he opened his satchel. He handed Rachel a foil bundle and gave her a merry grin. 'Right, I think this little lot should just be enough to calm your grumbly tummy once and for all.'

'Thanks, Larry,' Rachel beamed.

'Lydia's fixed me up with a right royal picnic – and I'm pretty sure she's put something special in there for you, too,' he added with a raised eyebrow. 'I think the cold curdled soup has settled on my stomach, so I could do with a bit of nosh when we've finished in here.'

'OK, Rachel – stay in earshot and don't go wandering off,' Lorraine demanded, giving her daughter a lingering look that she understood.

'Right, that should do it,' Larry puffed, ripping the last remnants of matted ivy off the door, revealing the doorknob and the faint outline of eleven etched bees that encircled the brass keyhole below it.

He produced a key from his pocket and placed it in the lock, and with a slow grinding turn and a swift hefty shove, both he and Lorraine stepped over the threshold with nervous apprehension.

When the alcove door had slammed shut, Rachel wasted no time in sniffing Larry's picnic bundle. It smelled so deliciously scrumptious, but as she went to open it, another scent caught her nostril's attention.

Adamant the gamey smell wasn't coming from her bundle, she stared up at the morose sky. Snaking between the bevy of battered buildings, a long veil of white smoke wrapped around the church's crumbling spire.

For a fleeting moment, she thought about telling her mother they were probably not alone, but her inquisitive nature won out.

It was her chance to find out about the town, and she didn't want any grownups spoiling her curiosity in exploring the place, so she ignored the growls and groans from her stomach, stashed Larry's picnic bundle into her backpack and marched towards the tail end of the white smoke.

* * *

Rachel soaked up the atmosphere and the town's Victorian architecture. Crossing cobblestones streets and footpaths, she followed the trail of white smoke and ignored the scores of pesky pigeons that shadowed her every move, knowing full well she had a banquet of food in her backpack.

Ahead of her and over a small bridge, a flash of colour caught her eye. Even in the lacklustre light, the vivid violet colour stood out against the sullen surroundings of the dreary street.

In dribs and drabs, the dour depressing weather slowly began to lift; however, a smattering of colossal caliginous clouds hung stubbornly in the sky, refusing to bathe the town in sunlight.

The drizzle fizzled out, so Rachel removed her poncho, shook it dry and squeezed it into her bulging backpack.

After turning corner after corner, an annoying squeaking caused her to stop and glance up. The peeling oval sign spun slowly on its single chain. The wind abated, and *The Golden Toad* pub sign turned no more.

The textbook twin of her father's favourite drinking establishment stood before her. The pub's boarded up windows prevented her from seeing the inside the premises and numerous padlocks barred her way through the fortified metal door.

However, to her right, and halfway up the wall, a white notice board drew her undivided attention away from the pub's impenetrable armour.

The blatant warning wasn't beating around the bush:

KEEP OUT! I REPEAT, KEEP OUT!

FROM THIS DAY FORTH, THIS ESTABLISHMENT IS CLOSED

MAKE NO MISTAKE, THIS PROPERTY IS CLOSED FOR GOOD

FOR GOLDEN TOAD CLUB MEMBERS ONLY

**WOULD MEMBERS PLEASE NOTE, WE HAVE TEMPORARILY
RELOCATED TO THE NOOK & CRANNY PUBLIC HOUSE**

SORRY FOR THE INCONVENIENCE

Rachel felt irritated the drinking establishment wasn't open for business. The overenthusiastic security on this pub seemed utterly ludicrous. *What did they have in there – the crown jewels*, she thought exasperatingly.

With a disgruntled sigh, she made her way towards a small humpback bridge, where a multi-coloured wooden sign said:

RAINBOW COTTAGES

TRESPASSERS WILL BE SHOT ON SIGHT

Rachel leant against the violet gate and gaze at the violet cottage with its twin-bricked chimneys, which were little more than stumps, and at the humongous hole in its thatched roof that looked to be moulting up a rug.

Eager for her adventure to begin, she went to open the gate, but she stopped as another trail of white wispy smoke sped across the cottage's overgrown garden, which was peculiar as there wasn't any wind. Right down at the far end of the winding road, a blue cottage belted out plenty of pungent white smoke out of its thickset twin-bricked chimneys.

As she marched further along the pavement, the sound of rushing water drowned out most of the pigeons' relentless cooing.

Rachel approached the blue cottage with all the stealth she could muster. Reaching the cottage's gate, dense rows of bulrushes smothered either side of the footpath. Keeping herself as inconspicuous as possible, she crouched down and wandered back and forth, doing her utmost to find a route that hadn't squelched underfoot, as she hadn't the nerve to march right up to the front door and knock.

With a stroke of luck, she found a path of half-submerged paving slabs that led to the rear of the cottage, so she squelched slowly across them and wondered why the pigeons hadn't followed her along the path.

Rachel listened, but the incessant noise of fast running water marred her hearing. She gave the cottage the quick once over, however, by the look of it, it hadn't suffered any damage, and it appeared to be well looked after. Biting her lower lip, she pushed the side gate open, crept up to the window and on tiptoes, she peered inside.

Whoever lived here hadn't tidied up in years: the room resembled a mad jumble sale. To her right, bundles of clothes littered the place. To her left, bric-a-brac spewed out of crates and onto the floor. Beyond the dishevelled room, two fully clothed mannequins guarded another room that blazed so brightly, shadowy silhouettes danced across the ceiling.

Feeling that little bit braver, she snuck up to the open back door. The heat and gamey stench hit her immediately. Hearing nothing but the crackling of the ferocious fire, she took a deep breath and entered. With her heart pounding nineteen to the dozen, she made her way along the hallway with its musty blue wallpaper that had half peeled off the walls.

Sweating buckets in the unbearable sticky heat, Rachel gave the stiff military-dressed mannequins a furtive glance and entered the kitchen.

At the back, a roaring fire spat and hissed, belching white smoke up the twin chimney breasts. Two charred bells sat aside a mechanical spit that rotated far too close to the raging flames; the rattling chain links sounded like angry rattlesnakes as they turned the skewered pigeons.

Sitting at the centre of the kitchen, a scratched lopsided wooden table resembled a grocer's stall displaying vegetables she loathed the most: rotting in reed baskets, the overwhelming stench of asparagus, parsnips and sprouts made her want to gag, but her ears suddenly perked up, as she heard an unusual sound drifting closer.

Rachel stood rooted to the spot as strange scuffling sounds echoed down the hallway. The odd-sounding footsteps drew nearer. Blind panic rushed through her veins, and she froze up, but at that moment, the mechanical spit halted with such a loud clang it made her ears ring.

The kitchen reverberated with a shrill tirade of alarm bells.

Rachel heard a gasp behind her. With her back to the hallway, she grabbed the paring knife from the table and spun around so fast she felt her backpack smash into something soft that yelped from surprise.

Panting heavily, she stared wild-eyed into the corner of the kitchen, gripping her knife so hard it hurt the palm of her hand.

Bent over and huddled in a messy pile of discarded pigeon bones, a young boy cowered beneath her. His grimy hands covered his blackened sweat-streaked face. His ill-fitting clothes appeared a size too small here and a size too big there. He wore rough reed sandals; his cracked calluses looked hardened by his homemade footwear. He crawled into an even tighter ball as she took a tentative step towards him.

'D-don't h-hurt m-me!' he stammered.

Rachel knelt down as slowly as she could so as not to frighten him, placed the knife on the floor and slid it towards him. 'There you are – you have the knife now,' she told him. 'I'm not going to hurt you.'

The boy did nothing at first, but he suddenly lunged for the knife, snatched it up and cradled it like a baby with its first blanket.

Rachel gave him a reassuring smile, sat down, crossed her legs and rested her hands on her knees. Still holding tightly onto the knife, the boy eased himself off the bones and placed his back against the blue-tiled kitchen wall, drew his legs up and hugged them. His muddy-coloured eyes peered at her through his unkempt brown hair.

The boy stared at her for what seemed like ages, but he eventually pocketed the knife, lowered his gaze and sobbed quietly to himself.

Rachel reached into the depths of her pocket and pulled out the only clean handkerchief she had left. 'Here – why don't you use this,' she said, handing him her rumpled violet handkerchief.

He sniffed, raised his head, wiped his nose on his over-sized sleeves and wiped his tears away with her hanky. He offered it back to her, but she just shook her head and said gently, 'No, you keep it.'

'It – it r-reminds me of my s-sister,' he grizzled. *'Violet loved the colour...'*

Rachel waited for him to continue, but he just snuffled and remained silent. *He hasn't had a proper meal in ages,* she thought, staring at his emaciated body, so in one swift move, she twisted around and removed her backpack. But her snap movement had startled him, so she beamed back at him and said brightly, 'You must be getting fed up eating pigeon and sprouts all the time – so how would you like a picnic for a change?'

The boy's face lit up. He grinned widely at her as she plonked Larry's picnic bundle down in front of him.

Rachel unfolded the foil on one of the largest parcels. 'Now, let's see what Lydia's has in store for us – ah, ha – what about a ham sandwich?'

'Y-yes, please,' the boy said ecstatically, stretching out his bony hands in avid anticipation. His ravenous appetite took hold, and he snatched the foil parcel from her outstretched hands and savoured every bite.

The smorgasbord of food kept getting that little bit smaller, and she wondered if there would be any food left for Larry's picnic.

Rachel gave him the last foil parcel, but kept two of them back; she saved the largest parcel for Larry, as it smelt of ham, mustard and the pongiest cheese she ever had the misfortune to smell.

A cocktail stick harpooned a pink note into the other parcel that said:

To Rachel:

I think you'll need to keep your strength up, so I've made you your favourite P&J sandwiches. I hope you like my homemade bread and strawberry jam. Make sure Larry doesn't get into too much trouble and don't give him any of your sandwiches. We certainly don't want a repeat of those shenanigans at his fortieth Halloween birthday party.

Love

Lydia

Rachel said nothing as the boy devoured the food. At the end of the meal, he wiped his greasy mouth against his sooty sleeves, let out a loud burp and gave her a broad grin and an even broader smile.

Rachel smiled back at him. 'What's your name?' she asked, thinking he looked roughly around the same age as her.

'George Browning,' said George, trying not to burp again.

'Please to meet you, George,' said Rachel. 'I'm Rachel by the way – Rachel Cook,' she added with a grin and shook his cleanest hand.

'It's good to speak to someone after all this time,' he said sullenly.

'This town looks deserted, George,' said Rachel. 'Where is everyone?'

'Dunno,' he replied miserably, hugging his knees.

'Where are your parents?' Rachel asked him, treading carefully.

'I – I haven't seen my family for five winters,' he griped.

What family leaves their child alone for five years! Rachel thought.

'It's been so long, I can't even remember their faces,' George added, 'and I can't even remember how I got here – it's all just bits and pieces.'

It was a long shot, but Rachel's curious and wily nature spurred her on as she asked, 'George – um – do you know Henry Silverback?'

His face suddenly turned thunderous. 'Oh, him – oh, yes, I know him,' he snarled, his mood darkening a thousandfold. 'Henry and his henchmen have hounded me ever since I found myself here – always

shouting over the walls at me to open the gate and let them in. They dug tunnel after tunnel, but they never succeeded in getting inside the town. Last winter, Henry spotted me on one of the waterwheels and threatened to feed me to his dogs unless I obeyed his order and let him inside.

A week later, his brother, Wilfred, arrived with a huge cannon and wheeled it onto the high ridge and began firing cannonballs at the town, but at first, they either shattered or rebounded right back at them.

However, on the fourth day, they got lucky, and a cannonball hit the lighthouse, and its glass mirrors and light exploded. After that, they concentrated their cannonballs on the gate, but it soon fell. With their henchmen behind them, Henry and Wilfred marched triumphantly into town, ransacked most of the buildings and left a few days later.'

'Are you saying the lighthouse's light kept them out?' Rachel asked.

'Yes, but the light imprisoned me here, and every time I ventured out, I got dizzy, and I nearly passed out on a couple of occasions,' George told her. 'Without the light from the lighthouse, I was free to leave, but after miles of walking about, I found nothing but endless forests and hills – and I felt like I was walking around in circles. I haven't seen anyone else around town, well, not until I saw you skulking around in my kitchen.'

'Well, you're not alone now, George,' Rachel said, sounding positive, trying desperately to lift his spirits. 'My mother's at the lighthouse right now. We have a boat – we can take you away from here.'

'I've been a prisoner here for far too long,' he said mournfully, 'and I could infect other children with my affliction if I left the island –'

Rachel saw the sheer terror in George's eyes; his eyes bulged, and he stared at her agog. He leapt to his feet and backed away from her, wiping his hands down his baggy trousers as if they were suddenly contagious.

'HOW COULD I HAVE BEEN SO STUPID? I'M – I'M SO SORRY!'

'George – *what's wrong?*' she demanded.

'Please forgive me,' he said and bolted out of the kitchen.

Rachel rushed after him, but he had too much of a head start, and she couldn't see through, above or beyond the tall bulrushes. She called out his name in every direction, but the never-ending noise of running water drowned out her desperate and heartfelt cries.

What was she to do? Should she head back to the lighthouse and tell her mother about George and his missing family, or wait and see if he came back to the cottage? He could be gone for hours, days or maybe even weeks.

With a heavy heart, she gave up and slunk back into the cottage. In the smoky kitchen, burning embers crackled and spat in the grate as they

cremated the pigeons. By the sink, she cast the smelly kitchen bin aside in disgust, as the stench of discarded pigeon pie made her feel quite ill.

With the remaining foil parcels back in her backpack, she licked her parched lips and stared down at the crusty corroded taps. As she tried each tap in turn, they flatly refused to budge. Her thirst chipped away at her patience, so with the din of rushing water pummelling her eardrums, she made a snap decision and shouldered her backpack.

In a right old huff, she marched towards the door beside the fireplace and pushed it wide open with such force, she tripped and cartwheeled down the slippery wooden stairs. Rolling to a stop beside a boggy bank, she lay on her aching back feeling rather stupid. In her haste, she had disregarded the sign on the door that said MIND THE SLIPPERY STEPS!

As she waited for her spinning head to settle, her troubled thoughts turned to George and wondered why he had run off like some scaredy-cat when she was just getting to know him. *Was it something she'd said*, she wondered, but then, a loud splashing sound distracted her, and she stared over at the water's edge and at the plunging wave that had just whisked her food parcels downstream.

Leaping to her feet, she stumbled after her sandwiches as they sailed away. Slimy rocks and aquatic plants hindered her every pounding step, but hunger prevailed, and she blazed a trail towards the tunnel that lay beneath an overgrown graveyard that had gone to seed many moons ago.

CHAPTER TEN

The Cadaverous Crypt

Rachel's sandwiches were less than a stone's throw away, but as she entered the tunnel, she met nothing but gloom and the smell of decay.

The entrenched darkness enveloped her, and she hit the ground with little grace. Winded and out of breath, she checked herself for injuries, but none of her body parts seemed to be broken, sprained or otherwise missing, so she got back onto her feet and squinted into the darkness.

With baby steps, she slowly turned around, hoping to see the tunnel's entrance, but no sliver of light cut through the ingrained blackness, so she had little choice but to follow the churning water.

Moving at a snail's pace, she kept the fast-running stream to her left.

Bumping her head on stalactites and tripping over stalagmites, she fumbled her way further into the darkness. Pins and needles numbed her outstretched fingers, and she wondered how long she could keep this up when, for the umpteenth time that day, the sense of foreboding flooded her senses. The sheer agony of not knowing what or where the danger would come from struck her down with dread –

The shuffling of feet took her by surprise. 'Ah, I see our prey took the bait,' muttered a man's cold monotone voice. 'Pity – I was hoping for more sport – maybe next time, eh?'

'*W-who's there?*' Rachel called out.

'Forgive my manners – here – let me give you some light.'

PLOP!

Rachel froze. Another plopping noise reached her ears, and a sardonic chuckle echoed off the cavern walls followed by a distant droning noise that grew louder and drew nearer. The instant rush of wind caught her by surprise, and then an unnerving buzzing flew overhead.

Moments later, a piercing pinpoint of blue light bedazzled her.

The cavern lost its murky façade, and she looked on in amazement at the flight of dazzling dragonflies that feasted on Lydia's sandwiches. The dragonflies' rapacious appetites intensified, and their elongated bodies exploded with wondrous colours so bright, they pervaded the cavern's deepest nooks and crannies, smothering the shadows with majestic light.

'Pretty – aren't they,' the man said in the same monotone voice, but it was a statement of fact – not a question. 'It's been quite a while since I've tasted Lydia's homemade jam – but she hasn't lost her touch,' he added gleefully, then proceeded to suck his sticky fingers clean.

Rachel didn't hesitate for a second and turned to flee –

Someone grabbed her arms and forced them behind her back. Finding her courage, she fought the assailant with all the strength she could muster, but their strong pincer fingers kept her rooted to the spot.

'Careful now – we don't want to damage the merchandise,' said the man, but by his curt and brutish tone, she felt he didn't mean it at all.

'If you keep quiet and do as you're told – you won't get hurt,' hissed a young boy's voice, his veiled threat backed up by his icy-cold demeanour.

Rachel's nostrils wrinkled, and she stifled a sneeze. His dire warning came with ambrosia breath: it was if he'd just eaten a bouquet of flowers.

'Wise words indeed,' the man announced, 'but don't make promises I can't keep,' he added sneeringly and stepped into the dragonfly light.

Rachel glared daggers at the man who had decided to show himself.

The man wasn't what she expected at all. Even in the ebbing light, his suave features showed off his chiselled face, but his unkempt pitch-black beard made him look a lot older than his years. His long mane of black hair fell down to his broad shoulders. His grey tweed suit, however, had seen better days – and even its rumples looked rumpled. The man's outward appearance gave the impression he had been sleeping rough.

'I'm with friends – they'll be looking for me,' said Rachel hesitantly.

The man chuckled derisively and made himself comfortable on top of a stone coffin. He removed his trilby hat and placed it beside him, and with a deepening exhale, he drawled, *'Lying will do you no good, Miss Cook.'*

For a fleeting moment, she held the notion the man sitting in front of her had tried to help her in the poison pool (but if she was completely honest with herself, she had a nasty feeling he wouldn't help his own grandmother across the road).

Quickly gathering her composure, she thought hard and wondered – for some unfathomable reason – why the man and boy from Growler's hot dog van had followed her here.

'What do you want from me?' she spat, her anger masking her fear.

'All in good time, Rachel – all in good time,' he told her mockingly, beckoning her to come closer, but she scowled back at him and stood her ground. 'People come, and people go – but family are forever,' he added musingly and smiled as he patted the dusty coffin affectionately. 'Now then, take my Great Uncle Brutus here. Spilt the blood of his soldiers and even the blood of his own sons in battle. A decorated war hero, Brutus, wasn't the one to spare the rod and spoil the child – and yet he lays in the crypt of our hallowed church. Even in death, our Lady Madeline took pity on him and mercifully forgave him his cruelties.'

The man gave her a smirking stare and snapped his fingers.

Rachel let out a cry of surprise: a knobbly knee had pressed hard into her back, and she fell to the ground. Her knees stung from the impact, but her shoulders and arms felt instant discomfort; her backpack swung in front of her eyes – wrenched from her by her sweet-smelling captor, a boy, who appeared at least five years older than her.

The boy stepped towards the man and said, '*Your prize, Father.*'

The man's eyes blazed as he reached out and took the backpack from his son. 'Now, Rachel – I do hope for your sake that the item we wish to acquire is still here –' he began, but he suddenly let out a maniacal laugh. 'Well then, I do believe we've struck gold this time,' he added grinningly, letting out a low whistle as he flipped open the plush velvet case.

Rachel's heart sank: her mother's ring twinkled in the lurid light.

'Now, this is worth a king's ransom,' the man said jubilantly. 'The beautiful handiwork is unmistakable. Irene Cutler is the finest jeweller in the land, and it would be a sin if her jewellery fell into the wrong –'

'– YOU'RE NOTHING BUT A NASTY COMMON CROOK!' roared Rachel fearlessly, struggling desperately against the boy's indomitable clutches.

In a flash, the man's face filled with unadulterated rage, and he shot to his feet, knocking over her backpack as he stormed towards her.

Rachel kept her nerve and stayed down on her knees.

'*Father, she doesn't understand – she's not like us!*' yelled the boy.

The heat of the moment ended as quickly as it had begun.

The man sniffed, and his anger drained from his face. He stared over his son's shoulder and down at her. His brow furrowed as deep as a gorge as he studied her defiant expression. '*I have misjudged you, Rachel,*' he said solemnly, a curious glint in his eye as he sniffed the air once more, '*as you have probably misjudged me,*' he added wearily, almost stumbling as he approached his ancestor's coffin.

'Father – is anything wrong?' the boy asked, his concern apparent.

'Rachel's no threat to us,' he replied croakily, his sweaty ashen face filled with sadness as he turned to look at his son. 'She's family –'

The dragonfly light blinked; a shadow came into being, dragging the man down and away from the coffin. The boy rushed towards his father, but the breathless shadow bellowed, 'STAY RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE.'

Rachel couldn't believe her own eyes and a lump stuck in her throat; she tempered her emotions as George stood before her, his paring knife glinting against the man's pallid throat.

'RACHEL – ARE YOU HURT?' asked George heatedly.

'I-I'm fine,' she replied graciously. 'They didn't hurt me.'

'Let my father go – and you won't get hurt,' seethed the boy, his intimidating threat laced with ill intent.

'I don't take orders from the likes of you,' spat George. 'You're either very brave or very foolish coming back into town,' he added scornfully. 'Now, I think it's about time you two made your way back to your master unless you want the wrath of Henry's riding crop across your face –'

The man let out a deep groan. His slick hair stuck to his forehead and perspiration trickled down his thick bushy sideburns. Rachel stared at the man's greying face, and he seemed to age in front of her. Maybe the fading light had tricked her into thinking he'd grown older, but she had to face facts, the man wasn't a threat to anyone, anymore.

'George, there's something wrong with him,' Rachel squeaked.

'It's just a ploy,' snarled George. 'I'm nobody's fool –'

The man collapsed to the floor with a sickening thud. The boy rushed to his father's side and fell to his knees. George stepped away from them, still brandishing his blade threateningly.

'Can't you see he's ill?' the boy snapped. 'If he dies because of you – it will be on your head, boy,' he added and unbuttoned his father's shirt.

Rachel rushed towards them. 'What's wrong with your father?' she asked the boy, feeling no ill will towards the pair of them.

'It's an injury above his heart – it almost cost him his life,' he replied darkly. 'The doctor warned him about the long journey, and my mother and sister begged us to stay, but we had no other choice – we had to try.'

The man's eyes opened, and his eyelids fluttered as he came to his senses. 'But after all this time we found it,' he muttered. 'Rachel has the elixir – I can smell its sweet aroma – we still have a chance to find him...'

'Father – thank God!' the boy cried, brushing the damp hair out of his father's torturous eyes. 'Now hold still – I need to check on your injury.'

'What happened to you?' Rachel asked the man.

'I-I paid the p-price for being f-foolhardy and rash,' he spluttered with deep regret, his reply laden with sadness. 'To my shame, I forgot my family's motto – *Dolus intortis ac Gallantry in proelio.*'

George choked and edged closer. '*Guile and Gallantry into Battle,*' he trembled and gave the man a look of adulation and pride as he knelt down. 'My brother and I awoke to that motto every morning – and every time we went to bed. I've never known my father to be foolhardy or rash.'

The man fought back his grief-ridden tears as he grabbed George's filthy hands and said, 'Is that really you, George – behind all that dirt?'

'And is that really you father behind that grizzled beard?' he squeaked as he squeezed his father's trembling hands.

The boy, however, just glared at George suspiciously. 'How can you be my father's son – my younger brother?' he protested passionately.

George's face fell, and he looked ashamed as he stared back at the boy and said miserably, '*Madeline's affliction still ails me, Finn.*'

Finn's face mellowed at once. His anger towards George vanished in an instant as he tried to comprehend his brother's words.

'Your mother and sister were heartbroken when you were taken,' George's father told him. 'Violet wanted to come with us, but the journey has taken us far from our lands – and it's been fraught with danger.'

'Are mother and Violet all right?' George asked.

Finn's face brightened. 'Your mother is well and Violet's now taller than you, George,' he smirked.

George peered into Finn's iridescent green eyes. 'I see you're not so wet between the ears anymore, brother,' he said with a tinge of sadness. 'Time's held me prisoner here for so long – but not for you, Finn. I still remember you playing truant from classes, so you could hone your swordsmanship with General Blight,' he added with a sly smile.

Finn chuckled. He grabbed hold of George's neck and pulled him so close their skulls cracked. 'We've been searching for you for so long, George...' Finn began, but as he laid his hands on his brother's shoulders, his face filled with hope and longing. '*We've come to take you back home – and no affliction is going to stop us.*'

George gave Rachel a look of regret. 'How can I?' he replied. 'I've probably infected Rachel already. I can't risk infecting anyone else.'

'Our new physician knows a lot about the condition,' said Finn. 'He's made progress with the other children – and he's close in finding a cure.'

Rachel's stomach tightened: she didn't like the sound of the disease at all. *Why hadn't she heard of Madeline's affliction before?*

The man groaned, and his face scrunched up in pain. Thick beads of sweat leaked through the front of his open shirt. His chest shimmered and blistered; minuscule forks of blue lightning danced back and forth across his terrible wound that raged beneath his leathery pulsating skin.

'N-not a pretty sight for a y-young girl, eh?' he stuttered.

'*Your heart is on fire,*' Rachel hissed.

'Who did this to you, Father?' pleaded George.

'*The Beasts of Bogtide,*' Finn interjected with snarling resentment.

George appeared thoroughly confused. 'But – but those beasts are just a myth to scare children,' he argued. 'Mother used to read those old fairy stories to us at bedtime – and that story gave us nightmares.'

'Mythical beasts don't slay armies,' rebuked Finn darkly.

Their father coughed for quiet. 'If an army couldn't stand against the beasts, then maybe one man could get close enough to kill them,' he added, shooting his sons a deep look of remorse. 'I tracked the beasts down to their icy lair and found the children's bones buried deep beneath the castle keep. I knew I had found my quarry and what must be done.'

Even at the height of the snowstorm, I could hear the beasts' restless slumber, but as I raised my sword to kill the oldest of them, our eyes met, and I hesitated, bringing the beast's deadliest horn down on me.'

'You wounded it,' Finn hissed. 'You achieved what no army could.'

'I was foolish to think I could defeat such a creature,' the man replied.

'But the beasts went to ground,' said Finn. 'The killings stopped.'

Their father's face fell into despair. 'So much has happened since you've been away,' he told George. 'We've left General Blight back home manning the castle, but his men grow weary, and fear seeps into their hearts and of those who dare to step into the night. W-we must – we must leave n-now –' he added and slunk forward with a deep groan.

Rachel immediately comforted the man and placed his head in her lap; his pasty face glistened with sweat as he fought to stay conscious.

'The elixir, F-Finn – go and g-get the e-elixir,' he added drowsily, his breathing heavy and hoarse. 'I can feel my mind slipping away...'

Rachel stifled a scream, and George went as white as a sheet as his father's body began to crystallise – almost fading out of existence.

'Hold on father – just hold on,' said Finn and scrambled over the rocks.

'Look after father,' George asked Rachel and bolted after him.

The man drew Rachel close. His gelid breath smelled of roses as he whispered in her ear, 'Promise me... p-promise me you'll look after George, Rachel. He'll b-be s-safer in your lands with our family to p-protect him.'

'But George hasn't seen you in five years,' Rachel squeaked.

'S-speak to your mother and r-remind her of our b-blood oath – s-she'll understand,' the man begged and stared down at his jacket. 'Reach into my left pocket, Rachel – quickly now, we don't have much time.'

Rummaging inside his pocket, she pulled out a wax paper parchment bound tightly with double-knotted strings of reed. Her eyes widened in awe as she stared at the horn-shaped object in the dwindling light.

'Keep it safe, Rachel,' he wheezed, 'and when the time is right – give it to your mother and tell her Sir James Browning sends his regards.'

As she pocketed the beast's horn, she felt the whole world falling in on top of her: her mother had a past she knew nothing about. 'I'll look after your son,' she told him firmly, but her face seemed troubled as she asked, 'You said I was family – I don't understand.'

He gritted his teeth. 'Even on your knees, you stood your ground. You showed me no fear – and that's a rare gift in any of God's creatures,' he told her admiringly. 'Your mother's gift to you is bonded by blood. I had to test you, Rachel – I had t-to be s-sure you were f-family.'

Rachel grabbed his hands to comfort him in his wretched torment. '*Is there nothing I can do to help you?*' she whispered softly.

'Just treat George as you would a brother,' he told her, his crystalline tears obliterating his bloodshot eyes. 'There is strength in family,' he added blindly and slowly wilted away into nothingness.

Unable to move, Rachel just sat there in stunned silence and shock.

The cavern coughed as if it had come down with a nasty cold. Dust and detritus rained down on the dearly departed.

'I HAVE THE ELIXIR, FATHER – I HAVE IT –' Finn began, but his desperate words came crashing down to earth as did the rest of him.

Reeling in agony, Finn pulled his injured leg over a coffin. He heaved himself onto its cracked lid, scattering the thick grey dust as he slowly dragged the backpack behind him.

'*Stay there, Finn – I'm coming over,*' George yelled, but the cavern shook so violently, he stumbled and fell down onto the waterlogged floor.

Still shocked by Sir James' sudden disappearance, Rachel watched disquietingly as something golden stained the inside of her backpack.

'*Quickly, George – take it to father,*' cried Finn and threw the backpack into George's outstretched arms, but in his weakened state it fell short – and it smashed against the rocks, then tumbled into the rising water.

The blue light came in an agonising blinding flash.

Rachel instantly felt sick to her stomach. The strong stench of honey overpowered her idle thoughts, and she fought hard to stay conscious.

The overwhelming desire to sleep sapped her strength.

Above the sounds of rock crashing against rock, she heard a baby cry and a mother's hushing words. The dulcet tones grew clearer and nearer, and her lucid memory brought her first birthday party to the fore.

Cecil the Clown's ruby lips stretched into a broad grin; he twisted the balloons into a squeaky pink pony, but as he handed his handiwork into her soft baby hands that happy moment vanished into the void.

Bent over double in searing agony, Rachel reeled as some unnatural force ravaged through her precious childhood memories, each one of them suffering the same cruel fate.

Outside her home in Princes Drive, her parents cheered as she rode her bike unaccompanied for the very first time. Taking a tight turn, her father took pictures as she pedalled furiously towards her grandmother.

Please don't take that memory away from me, Rachel thought, but her grandmother vanished, and she forgot that most cherished moment.

In a fit of hurt and rage, she screamed, fighting back against the force that had wiped clean all but one of her most treasured memories.

Breathing heavily from the sheer mental exertion, she ignored the numbing water that rose well above her knees.

Throughout the cavern, patches of lichen suddenly shone like dying stars – illuminating the choppy stream that swirled around her legs.

George clung onto a high rock, calling out to Finn as he pulled himself out of the floodwater that by now had risen over most of the coffins.

Rachel tried to get his attention and called out, but she recoiled in horror as Alice Winterbright's apparition bobbed to the surface.

Rachel scoured the water for the poisonous jellyfish, but instead, she found Jenny Marsh's thin face sailing through the swollen waters.

Her friends' images crept up the cavern's wall and undulated against the ceiling like flags fluttering nervously before the coming storm.

'C'mon, Rachel, you don't want to be late,' said Alice's reflection up on high. 'It's not every day you're made Prefect.'

The cavern exploded with a cacophony of screaming schoolchildren.

Rachel stood spellbound, her wide eyes fixated on the ceiling. Her classmates from Plums seeped out of the walls and began hooting and cheering as her mirror image took to the stage. Her parents clapped, but her father shot out of his chair, gave her an embarrassing loud whistle through his fingers and whopped with the rest of the crowd.

Plums' Head Girl joined her side, and the crowd cheered even louder.

Judy Silverback gave Rachel a grin then a warm smile and shook her hand and said, 'Make your parents proud.'

Rachel's memory of that moment stood ageless against time, but she felt the force rear up again as it tried to relinquish that happy moment.

The lichen starlights dulled and slowly began to blackout.

One by one, her classmate's images seeped back into the wall, their cries of jubilation echoing around the musty cavern until they fell silent. Conjuring a strength of will she never thought possible, she fought back and held on to that most treasured memory, holding onto the image of her parents and Judy, who she admired more than anyone else at Plums.

Shivering in the icy water, she fought to breathe as her mind rebelled against the dark supernatural force that wanted to leave her with nothing more than misbegotten nightmares and unforgotten dreams.

Breaking water, she gulped down the stagnant air. Devoid of so many memories, the cavern's ceiling fell back into blackness.

To her right, a strange light rolled across the turbulent water.

Still weakened by her ordeal, she managed to distance herself from the thick bank of albinotic smog that threatened to smother the cavern.

Squinting through the gloom, she spotted George lying exhausted on a flat rock. With the smog snapping at her heels, she headed towards him not daring to look back.

‘GEORGE, OVER HERE’ she bellowed desperately.

George leapt towards her. His face looked tired and withdrawn as he pulled her up onto dry land. ‘*Finn vanished before my eyes,*’ he bleated.

‘Your father went the same way –’ Rachel began.

The cavern shuddered violently.

Rachel and George grabbed one another: the cavern rocked back and forth, and the ground beneath their feet suddenly dropped.

Rachel’s lightning reflexes kicked in, and she spun George with her. They fell against the ground and rolled up against an overturned coffin.

The stinking smog pushed onwards and outwards.

‘*The island’s sinking,*’ George blurted out. ‘*We’ve got to get to your boat.*’

‘We need to get out of this cavern first,’ Rachel urged. ‘The water’s rising fast and that smog smells poisonous –’

The cavern plunged into darkness.

‘*Oh, that’s just great,*’ George spat. ‘*Now, what do we do –?*’

Rachel and George froze: a fiery white light swam towards them with all haste, but it struggled against the strong current and rising water.

‘*What on earth is it?*’ Rachel hissed.

‘*Er – maybe we should keep away from it –*’ George began.

Breaking water, the albino squirrel leapt onto the rock and shook its blazing fur. ‘*It’s Serendipity,*’ Rachel cried out with joy.

The huge cavern basked in its white light. It stood on its hind legs, looked them up and down and twitched its whiskers nervously, deciding whether they were friend or foe, but at last, it gave them an urgent couple of squeaks and then scampered over towards the recess in the rocks.

‘I think it wants us to follow it,’ Rachel suggested.

‘*You can’t be serious?*’ George barked. ‘You want us to follow a soggy squirrel that’s lit up like a light bulb?’

‘Rats leave a sinking ship,’ Rachel said, treading tentatively towards the squirrel as not to spook it. ‘Serendipity will be our guiding light.’

‘Anyway, there isn’t a way through there,’ said George knowingly. ‘The tunnel to the mine caved in years ago –’

Serendipity scurried through the tunnel’s entrance and spun around, squeaking back them with the utmost urgency.

'Well, I'll be damned,' George added.
The thickening smog edged closer.
'C'mon, George – *let's get out of here,*' Rachel screeched, and they both ran towards Serendipity and the tunnel beyond.

* * *

The mine's wooden beams creaked and groaned.

Discoloured water dribbled down the drenched rock face. With every breath, Rachel tasted the minerals in the monotonous mist that impaired their desperate flight from the encroaching smog. Behind her, George cursed as he slipped on the walkway that had just about rotted away.

Serendipity's frantic canter had all but dribbled down to a feeble trot, and its fur barely lit the path in front of them.

'*What's that up ahead?*' Rachel asked.

'It's the main mine shaft – you can feel the breeze,' George replied.

With the end just in sight, Rachel quickened her pace, and she almost stepped on Serendipity's tail as it did its best to keep ahead of her.

In her haste, she had almost fallen headfirst into the mineshaft, as it had dropped down for at least twenty feet directly below them.

The mineshaft walls glistened with muddy striations.

They managed to get down in one piece with just a few scrapes and scratches; however, their clothes bore the brunt of their endeavour.

'Which way now, Serendipity?' Rachel asked, brushing the cloying mud off the front of her dress. 'I know you're tired, but we need to –'

Serendipity squeaked, flicked its tail agitatedly, ruffled its whiskers with its paws, turned and scurried away up the mineshaft.

'COME BACK HERE – YOU STUPID SQUIRREL,' bellowed George furiously. 'Well, that's just peachy – now we're really in the dark –'

George ate his words: Serendipity's fur soaked up the feeble sunlight, which relit the tunnel with thriving white light, but suddenly it waved its paws back and forth – squeaking desperately like a call to arms.

'C'mon, Rachel – your squirrel's come up trumps – it's found a way out of here,' George cried. 'What – what are you doing down there?'

'Shusss, George,' she replied. 'I'm pretty sure I can hear a rumbling sound beneath us,' she added and pressed her ear even harder against the ground, creasing and messing up her dress even more.

'*All I can hear is that squirrel of yours,*' he moaned, but his feet felt the odd rumbling sound that grew more intense after each passing moment.

Serendipity squeaked no more.

'Um – shouldn't we be getting a move on,' added George uneasily.

'Whatever it is, it's getting closer,' said Rachel, more curious than worried as she sprang to her feet, dusted herself down and squinted into the mineshaft's black abyss. 'Hmmm... I still can't see anything –'

Sanguine lights danced out of the darkness.

'RACHEL – GET BACK!' George bellowed, grabbing her arm, almost wrenching it off as he pulled her back against the wall.

The wild rush of wind took them by surprise.

The pungent backdraft of equine smell, musky leather and fusty dust forced its way up their nostrils, and they both sneezed up a storm.

They spluttered and coughed as the pit ponies galloped past them.

With just inches to spare, the smelly ponies jostled for space as they made their desperate escape. As the last remnants of echoing hooves died away, yet another disturbing sound whooshed up the mineshaft.

Aided by the squirrel's illuminating fur, they saw the turbulent water rising and rocketing towards them at an astonishing rate of knots.

George grabbed Rachel's hand and pulled her towards Serendipity and their only way out. They struggled through the quagmire left behind by the ponies' stampede, but they pressed onwards and up the shaft.

'It's gaining on us,' George screeched, looking exhausted.

'I'm going to give you a piggyback ride unless you keep up,' warned Rachel, but the cantering of hooves interrupted her idle threat.

Two pit ponies fell in beside them. With their rubicund eyes wild with terror, the sooty ponies stamped their hooves agitatedly.

'Look, they're offering us a ride,' Rachel blustered.

'THAT WATER'S RIGHT BEHIND US,' George bellowed. 'Oh, God – that smog's coming up the mineshaft with it. *We've got to get out of here!*'

George mounted the blackest pony, but the other pony faltered and let out a cry as the ground shifted sideways, and it stumbled on the rocks.

His headstrong pony nearly threw him off as it galloped towards the stricken pony. Jets of water burst forth and cascaded down the walls.

'GET THE PONIES OUT OF HERE,' Rachel shouted. 'I'LL BE RIGHT BEHIND YOU,' she added forcefully.

George nodded, grabbed their halters and galloped away.

The smog snapped at her heels, and she ran full pelt up the mineshaft just as it began to collapse. Her rapid reflexes sent her spinning as volley after volley of splintered rock ricocheted beneath her twisting torso.

Barely landing on two feet, she raced after George, but the mineshaft exploded right above her head.

With salty water and rocks raining down on her, she rolled herself into a tight ball and weathered the storm as it pummelled her body.

Through the murky mist of spray, George cantered towards her.

Rachel got to her feet and felt the bruises welling up on her back, but her legs felt icy cold, and she suddenly couldn't feel or move them.

Fear took hold as a veil of sable smog snaked around her ankles; the smog scurried and wrapped around her legs and waist until it coiled so tightly around her chest, she could hardly breathe at all.

The smog's intense cold threatened to suffocate her lungs, but to her shock and horror, two skeletal hands shot out of the devilish smog.

Putrefied mottled flesh crept along long spindly arms that twitched spasmodically as sinew stuck muscle against bone. A slimy blackened skull and skeletal legs followed them out the smog. The crawling flesh spread slowly across its horrific face and down its gangly neck.

The creature cackled and let out a bloodcurdling scream.

Pinned to the spot, Rachel could do nothing but look on in horror.

Relishing its defiled rebirth, its crablike claws grabbed her head, and with terrified eyes, she let out a silent scream. Rolling her head from side to side, its grotesque horned-tongue licked its cruel lips. *'If I have to feed – it might as well be on family,'* the creature hissed and brought its foul mouth down on her neck, but its head suddenly snapped backwards.

Rachel flinched, revolted by its drooling mouth that crumpled into a sticky slobbering mess. With its sabre teeth shattering into a thousand shards, she smelt the foul stench of its breath as it wailed in agony and writhed in torment. The creature shrunk back into the smog but fuelled by vengeance, it shot back out with its disfigured face full of furious rage.

'RACHEL – GET DOWN,' George bellowed.

Rachel dropped to her knees and heard the thundering hooves.

Neighing in triumph, the pony's ferrule shoes met its mark again, crushing the creature's head into a disgusting pulp of skin and bones.

Reeling in pain, it clutched at its mutilated head; and with its crippled mouth unable to scream, it staggered and stumbled back into the smog.

The mineshaft shuddered then lurched sideways as salty water, and putrid mud spewed out of the walls in unrelenting torrents.

BRRRRRRRRRRRR!

They both heard the foghorn. It sounded out again.

'THAT'S SUZY – THAT'S OUR BOAT,' Rachel shouted and leapt onto her pony's back, whispering in its ear, *'Thanks for coming back for me.'*

'C'MON – LET'S GET OFF THIS ISLAND!' George urged.

Rachel looked over her shoulder: gallons of gushing water, mud and rocks pushed the smog back down the mineshaft.

With Serendipity bringing up the rear, they rode like the wind out of the tunnel's chaos and galloped along a barren, windswept plateau.

Another blast from the foghorn rallied them on.

'*Our boat's down there,*' Rachel yelled with relief as she spotted Suzy's funnel belching out clouds of dark grey smoke as she came in fast.

Far below them, the rest of the pit ponies sped along the rocky path towards the pier and the wild waves that lashed its wooden underbelly.

Suddenly, she went deaf as a post and almost fell off her ride, as an intense blast of cold air had slammed into her, but George held his reigns tight and glanced behind him and motioned her to do the same: plumes of albinotic smog spiralled high into the cloudless sky but soon vanished.

Urged on by the scary sight of the devilish smog and her gut feeling, she took a chance and ploughed through a field of ripening sunflowers.

George easily kept up with her mad dash, but Serendipity quickly fell behind, veered off and headed towards the chalky cliffs.

Rachel's lucky detour had brought them out parallel to the footpath.

George whooped with joy, spurred on by the sight of Suzy moored up ahead. With the boat bobbing up and down in the heavy swell, Larry and Lydia had their hands full, dragging and pushing the scared ponies along the walkway and up onto the swaying gangplank.

Larry looked in their direction and shouted over his shoulder.

Riding ahead of George, Rachel grinned as she sped along the pier.

The wooden planks protested as she ground to a sudden halt and slid off her pony with a hurried stumble and an undignified gait.

Larry and Lydia stepped off the gangplank, their worried faces now smiling at her as she rushed towards them.

'Thank God, we've found you,' Larry wheezed with his hands on his knees as he caught his breath. 'Lydia saw the smoke, and when we didn't turn up, she fired Suzy up and started searching the shoreline for us.'

'We searched the town for ages, but when your mother and I couldn't find you, we just followed the canals down towards the lake, and that's when we heard Suzy's foghorn, and Lydia soon picked us up.'

'It seems Suzy knew where to find you, too, Rachel,' Lydia beamed.

'We got worried when you took off like that without so much of a by your leave,' said Larry disapprovingly. 'I thought you'd been kidnapped.'

'Your mother's been beside herself since you disappeared, and she hasn't stopped crying since,' said Lydia chidingly, but she raised a smile.

Rachel lowered her eyes.

Lydia drew close and gave her a hug. 'Looks like you've been through the wars,' she told Rachel. 'You've a nasty bruise on your forehead.'

'To be honest, I don't think we have enough hot water in the kettle to wash all that dirt and mud off you,' Larry told Rachel with a smirk.

Lydia brushed Rachel's hair aside to get a better look at her injuries. 'Just a handful of cuts and a few bruises but you'll live,' she grinned.

Lorraine stepped off the gangplank and onto the pier. Her blanched knuckles wiped away fresh tearstains, and she held out her arms.

Rachel fell into them. '*I'll never put you through that again, Mum,*' she told her with all her heart – but this time, she really meant it.

A stroppy snort then an impatient neigh interrupted their embrace.

Rachel turned around and gave George such a smile, her teeth hurt. 'George, I'd like you to meet my mum – and my friends, Larry and Lydia,' she told him, but her merry smile vanished as George looked ill.

'P-leased to m-meet you,' he said woozily, swaying back and forth, his eyelids drooping, almost closing as his breathing slowed. 'Y-you k-know, I feel r-really f-funny right now –'

Larry and Lydia were already at his side and caught him as he fainted. With their arms wrapped firmly around his waist, they guided him along the pier, almost dragging him across the gangplank and onto the deck.

Rachel went to follow them, but Lorraine grabbed her shoulders.

'We'll leave him alone for now. Lydia will take good care of him,' Lorraine said. 'Now – after we're well away from the island and out of harm's way, you can tell me about George and how you two met up –'

The island thundered, and the white cliffs crumbled. Suzy rocked helplessly in the rolling swell. The cliffs continued to crash into the lake.

Larry came rushing towards them. 'C'mon – let's get this gangplank on board,' he blustered, but Rachel wasn't paying him or anyone else a blind bit of notice as she spotted a soggy white tail; she watched with a smile as it disappeared amongst the ponies' restless clomping hooves.

The island rocked. Like an overflowing pot, plumes of compressed steam hissed and squealed out of the porous limestone cliffs.

The voluminous steam condensed, shrouding the island in mist.

'*It looks like it's going to explode,*' Lydia yelled.

With Suzy fired up, Larry swung her around and put as much distance between them and the dying island...

* * *

Lorraine, Larry and Lydia stood on the stern and said nothing as they watched the grim spectacle unfold.

Rachel had just about managed to calm most of the ponies down when the island decided to explode, and she gasped as the island's entire cliff face suddenly vanished under a massive plume of billowing grey smoke that swallowed up what was left of the shoreline that hadn't sunk.

Everyone felt the echoing shockwaves.

Chunks of black rock shot through the island's smoke and arched across the sky, coming far too close for comfort as they splashed down off Suzy's bow. With the island's demise complete, Rachel searched for Serendipity and found the squirrel lurking by the fridge. With a sigh, she yanked open the fridge door, grabbed some hard cheese and coaxed the squirrel down below decks where it could hide and eat in peace.

With the island and the town of Little Inkcome at the bottom of the lake, Lydia gladly took over the steering from Larry, who found Lorraine peering out at the broiling cauldron of water where the island used to be.

'I know that look, Lorraine – what's bothering you?' he asked.

'I was reminiscing about Thomas – and his life's work that's gone forever,' she replied tearfully. 'Why did the island sink like that?'

'Those blasted brothers are to blame,' Larry seethed. 'After all those years digging holes, looks like the island finally sprung a leak and sank.'

'Thomas would be beside himself to see his life's work destroyed by wanton destruction,' said Lorraine downheartedly.

Larry patted her hand. 'Did you ever tell her about him?' he said lowly as if the ponies were listening in on their hushed conversation.

At first, Lorraine said nothing, but she gave him a faint smile. 'No – I didn't want Rachel to miss an uncle she would never get to meet.'

Skulking quietly by the lifeboat, Rachel's heart fluttered on hearing her mother's confession, and with the unexpected news, her mother had a brother, she almost forgot the real reason why she was loitering there.

I have an uncle – I have an uncle, she thought, but she gathered in her emotions and weaved her way through the snuffling ponies. With the heavy burden hanging over her head, she decided right there and then to tell her mother about her raggedy backpack that was probably at the bottom of the lake by now – along with the diamond ring.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Barker's Dozen

The sun snuck out from behind a bank of slow meandering clouds.

Rachel hugged herself as clumps of fresh goosebumps sprouted along her bare arms. The scant rays of sunlight cast brooding shadows across the lake and the boat that cut a swathe through its placid waters.

With a lump in her throat, she waved back at Suzy and the lone figure standing amongst the ponies and whispered, '*See you soon, George.*'

Serendipity squeaked pitifully at Suzy as the boat steamed onwards towards the horizon. Heavy footsteps drew nearer, which spooked the squirrel, so it scampered away and vanished into the thick undergrowth.

Lorraine sighed and stood impatiently beside Rachel. 'C'mon, let's get going. I promised your father we would meet him straight after work – and it's now almost five o'clock,' she urged. 'It's been some time, but I think I can remember the shortcut to the bakery.'

* * *

Rachel brushed the brambles aside and breathed a sigh of relief as they left the thicket far behind. Apart from a couple of ladders down her black tights, her mother appeared relatively unscathed after their longwinded trek through the prickly undergrowth.

Rachel, however, hadn't been so fortunate: her mother peered down at her dishevelled state and couldn't help but smirk as she delved into her handbag and brought out a hairbrush. Brushing the tangles out of her hair, she followed her mother through a pleasant sunlit glen.

By the time they had reached the first signs of civilisation, her blunt hairstyle was, for the most part, free from foliage and creepy-crawlies.

They climbed over a wobbly stile, and as they cut across a couple of fallow fields of churned earth and wiggling worms, they heard rumbling of traffic nearby and saw the plumes of smoke on the horizon.

They stood by the kerbside, searching for somewhere safe to cross, but they couldn't see much of anything through the persistent peasouper of smelly smoke that swirled all around them.

'*We'll just have to cross here,*' said Lorraine exasperatedly.

Rachel kept close to her mother as they stepped off the kerb and into the foggy road. Much to her surprise, her mother played chicken with surprising agility as they dodged car after speeding car.

On a whim, the wind suddenly changed direction.

Peering through the dispersing shroud of choking smoke, Rachel recognised her father's place of work: the massive bakery dominated the horizon. Its glory days well past its sell-by-date, Barker's Bakery stood crumbling before her. Jutting out of the bakery's buckling roof, thirteen scorched red-bricked chimneys belched out a torrent of acrid smoke.

The bakery looks condemned, thought Rachel darkly, as huge chunks of concrete had fallen off the walls; and in amongst the scraggy cracks, moss and lichen had etched a home deep within the exposed brickwork.

Suspended above the bakery's front entrance, a vast glowing cupcake hadn't rocked at all because its gimbals had long since worn away.

The company logo fizzled. As the gaudy neon cupcake burst back and forth into life, Rachel felt slightly out of sorts, as she couldn't take her eyes off the mesmerising light show as it led a merry dance.

Lorraine appeared ill at ease and checked the time on her wristwatch. '*We're running late*,' she snapped, bringing her daughter out of her daze.

'Make way – coming through, coming through!' commanded a voice that wouldn't take no for an answer – unless you wanted to eat dirt.

Rachel and Lorraine leapt back into the gutter in shock.

Humming a little ditty, the ponytailed cyclist sped along the footpath at great speed. Whisked away by a brief gust of wind, the stench of pungent aftershave departed along with the madcap cyclist.

Oblivious to the startled pedestrians diving for cover, the cyclist's speedy journey finally came to a shuddering halt; he ripped his crash helmet off his perspiring head and dismounted in double-quick time.

He wasted no time chaining his cycle to the fence and vanished into the bakery (ignoring the outraged dog owner whose pink poodle had been scared half out of its wits, as he had accidentally run over its paw).

Now in a seething foul mood, Rachel climbed out of the gutter, shook the sludge off her shoes and followed her mother down the garden path...

Right outside the bakery's front entrance, an enormous crowd had gathered. You could have heard a pin drop, but all of a sudden, the crowd craned their necks towards the reception's revolving door.

A brown briefcase catapulted out from the door, jettisoning a fluffy-ended pink unicorn pencil, a few pens, a sharpener and a battered brass fob watch. The briefcase landed hard, spilling the rest of its contents onto the weathered pavement. Ten cardboard boxes followed, and the baying crowd cheered as every one of them landed in the company's shrubbery.

A breathless shout sounded out – wheezing like a punctured bellow.

Rachel couldn't believe her eyes: her father's squished face appeared behind the revolving door's sweat-smeared glass.

Paul splayed his hands, determined he wasn't leaving the company premises by brute force – or any other means!

Behind him, a skinny security guard shouted, 'NOW, MR COOK, BE REASONABLE – YOU'VE HAD YOUR MARCHING ORDERS.'

'GET YOUR HANDS OFF ME – YOU OAF!' Paul shrieked, his mauve face turning a nasty shade of plum purple.

To Rachel's right, and with some difficulty, a wheezing uniformed man squeezed through the emergency exit: the lardy security guard lumbered over towards the fracas but hurried footsteps, and a strangled yell made him stop and look at the head of the mushrooming crowd.

Swaggering to the front of the onlookers, a lanky woman came to a stop and waddling right behind her, a heavyset woman elbowed the slowcoaches who weren't quick enough to get out of her way.

'GO GET HIM, TIGER,' the lanky woman shouted out of the crowd.

'SHOW HIM WHO'S BOSS, LOVE,' the heavyset woman bellowed with oodles of encouragement, blowing a romantic kiss at the lardy guard who blushed profusely as another blubbery kiss came his way.

Egged on by the woman's enthusiastic praise and the swelling crowd, the lardy security guard rolled up his white sleeves and grubby cuffs and joined his exhausted colleague who appeared pegged out by the exertion.

Lorraine strode towards the reception's door. 'WHAT ON EARTH'S GOING ON?' she demanded, glaring down at them through the slight gap. '*Take your grubby hands off my husband,*' she added threateningly.

The security guards rebuffed her and smirked openly.

Rachel joined her mother. By the bakery entrance, her father ranted and raved. He was putting up a brave fight as the security guards tried to bundle him out of the door. 'I have rights, you know – I'll have you all up in court – you see if I don't. Now, touch a hair on my head and I'll –' Paul began, but he fell silent and said no more.

The security guards sniggered.

Paul's chubby fingers refused to let go of the doorframe. His baldpate glistened with dripping sweat as his nostrils snorted and flared even more. He mumbled something incoherent, but the sopping wet toupee in his mouth made it quite impossible for him to make any sense.

Lorraine's eyes blazed with seething rage. Scowling at the security guards, she managed to whip her husband's hairpiece out of his mouth.

Paul looked like a fish out of the water as he gasped for fresh air. 'It's – it's all b-been a terrible m-mixup, my dear,' he spluttered, spitting the remaining false hairs out of his mouth.

'*I'll handle this, Paul,*' Lorraine snapped, wedging herself in the door.

Like a scolded puppy, Paul seemed crestfallen at her sudden outburst.

'Look, Miss – it's got nuffink to do wit you,' puffed the lardy security guard, choking his quarry with an overzealous headlock as his skinny colleague took a well-deserved break slouching on an old rickety bench.

'It's Mrs,' retorted Lorraine scathingly.

'Yeah, lady – mind yer own business and let us do our jobs,' added the skinny security guard with unexpected bravado. 'We're the best, you see – trained professionals – top of our trade – the crème de la crème.'

Lorraine shoved the revolving door and stepped right through it.

The lardy security guard spun like a wooden top and careered into his skinny colleague. Paul tried to make a break for it, but the skinny security guard tripped him up, and the lardy security guard fell on top him –

The security guards squealed like pigs!

With an earlobe in each thumb and forefinger, Lorraine twisted the security guards' ears, hissing menacingly into their lugholes, saying, '*I said – take your grubby hands off my husband.*'

The security guards' agony intensified.

Moments later, Paul dropped unceremoniously onto the floor. He tried to get up and back onto his feet, but he hadn't realised that one of his legs had gone to sleep, and he flopped about like a dizzy ragdoll.

The security guards cowered and licked their wounds.

Lorraine eased Paul onto his good leg and helped him through the revolving door. Rachel rushed to her father's side, and they held him up until his drowsy leg had woken up.

'I'm all right now,' he told them gratefully. 'I just need to move about a bit – that's all,' he added firmly, but he let out a cry of alarm as he slipped on a discarded egg and cress sandwich and spun on the spot until he fell into the flossy flowerbeds, scattering the donsy of garden gnomes.

The crowd went wild and roared with laughter.

Rachel and Lorraine pulled him off the ground, dragged him through a bed of pretty pansies and set him down on the nearest park bench.

They had barely sat Paul down when the revolving door spun, and a man stepped out. The crowd's clamorous cheering died down, and they shuffled nervously on their feet with their heads held down.

With the air of superiority, the middle-aged man adjusted his garish tie and glared contemptibly at the security guards who lurked nearby.

Rachel's eyes narrowed to slits: she recognised the madcap cyclist from his snowy grey ponytail and scrawny face.

‘Well, are you two on your tea break?’ he asked the security guards scathingly. They looked blankly at one another and shook their heads. ‘Good – then I suggest you escort Mr Cook from the company premises.’

‘Yes, Mr Lovejoy – right away –’ the skinny security guard began, but he let out a whimpering noise and hid behind his colossal colleague as Lorraine bolted off the bench with a thunderous look on her face.

With a few swift strides, Lorraine had come within an inch of Mr Lovejoy’s immaculate shoes. He eyed her with mild indifference (almost amusement) and caressed his starch-white goatee beard.

‘*What’s my husband doing out here with his belongings?*’ spat Lorraine venomously, the scent from his aftershave forcing her to step back a bit.

With a supercilious smile, Mr Lovejoy clasped his hands behind his back and wriggled his caterpillar eyebrows as he thought about his reply.

‘Well?’ Lorraine snapped.

‘Mr Cook has been dismissed from the bakery,’ he said at last. ‘Your husband was caught red-handed stealing property from the company.’

‘I DID NO SUCH THING!’ Paul roared from the bench.

‘I have an eyewitness,’ Mr Lovejoy informed him, and his well-manicured fingers beckoned to someone in the crowd. The crowd parted, and a young boy stepped forward. The pencil-thin teenager mooched towards them. ‘Ah, Mrs Cook, I do believe you’ve met my son, Colin?’

Lorraine glared at the boy. ‘Yes, I’ve had that misfortune,’ she replied sarcastically, studying his son’s acne-ridden face and stupid wide grin.

‘My son saw the theft taking place –’ Mr Lovejoy began.

‘– LIAR – LIAR!’ Paul protested, rubbing his legs as he struggled to get up off the bench, but his balance hadn’t quite returned. ‘I CAUGHT YOUR SON STEALING FROM THE –’

‘*How dare you imply my son’s a thief,*’ a woman’s disgruntled voice called out in anger. A short dumpy woman pushed her way out of the crowd and joined Colin, who smirked back at his mollicoddling mother.

Rachel and Lorraine stared daggers at the bespectacled woman.

‘My son wouldn’t dream of stealing anything,’ she added angelically, her glassy bulbous eyes misting up at the mere thought her son was a thief – petty or otherwise.

Colin’s acne blushed.

‘Too right, my petal,’ added Mr Lovejoy with pride. ‘Colin’s a credit to his family,’ he added parentally, placing his arm around the boy’s scrawny shoulder. ‘And as there’s a new opening in the company – I’d like to make an important announcement.’

With all his strength he could muster, Paul leapt off the bench and hobbled over towards Mr Lovejoy, spouting, 'Let me at him – let me at him,' but he held back because Lorraine had given him *one* of her looks.

'*I'll take care of him,*' Rachel mouthed to her mother, helping her father back towards the bench, not once taking her eyes off Mr Lovejoy, who had just cleared his leathery-skinned throat and wiped his hooked nose with an immaculate starched handkerchief.

My Lovejoy addressed the hushed crowd: 'The road has been long and hard. We've had our ups and downs – but I would like to thank all of you for the tireless effort you've put into this company. Remember, Barker's Bakery wouldn't be here today if it weren't for you – my loyal staff.

Regrettably, a once valued member of staff has let us all down. I bear no malice towards that individual and wish him the best of luck for the future. They say, "When one door closes, another door opens" and how true those words are today. Therefore, it gives me great pleasure to introduce you to someone who is very dear to me. Would you please give him a very warm welcome and show your appreciation for Mr Colin Lovejoy, your newly appointed Bun and Pastry Manager.'

The crowd erupted with tumultuous applaud; they rushed forward and patted the spotty smug-faced boy on the back, and one of them yelled, '*Congratulations, Colin – well deserved – the best man for the job.*'

Rachel scowled, seethed and simmered in silence.

Paul lurched forward and tottered slowly over towards Lorraine, who glowered at Mr Lovejoy and the toady crowd. He wrapped his arm around her waist and said stiffly, 'I'll get another job – you'll see.'

Rachel joined her parents.

With a weak smile, Lorraine placed Paul's rumpled toupee back on top of his head. The rambunctious crowd whooped as they hoisted Colin Lovejoy aloft and sang, 'For he's a jolly good fellow...'

Heavy footsteps clomped down the pavement and knuckles cracked.

Paul gulped and squeezed Lorraine's waist even tighter, as the gruff security guards had gained more than an ounce of courage and marched purposely towards him with grim determination and very sore ears.

CHAPTER TWELVE

A Rubbish Day

Rachel fell against the bed. Her thoughts back in the here and now, she felt like going back to sleep, but she had a packed day ahead of her. Since her father's dismissal and trumped-up charges of pilfering from the company's stationery cupboard, her parents' once buoyant finances had sunk without trace, and her parents had sat her down with a hot cup of tea and explained their financial woes.

With tears in their eyes, they had told her she would never walk the hallowed halls of Plums' Preparatory School ever again. Rachel had taken the bad news in her stride, but those bittersweet memories of her old school still chipped away at her pride.

Rachel thought about Gravelings, her new school, and their dull grey uniform that had all the charm of a prison cell: the grey pleated pinafore matched the grey tie, grey shirt, grey socks and shoes. By her bedside, her starched grey blazer hung stiffly in a closet – ironed to death by her mother's hand, while her old plum school uniform gathered dust in the musty cramped attic high above her head.

Rachel thought about her father, who still hadn't found a fulltime job and her mother, who now sold homewares from door to door, and she thought about the Wednesday that had turned her world upside down.

On occasions, she had dropped subtle hints to her parents about the whereabouts of George, but to her frustration, her father would always push her questions onto her mother, who would change the subject and ask her to put the kettle on or tidy her messy bedroom.

Last week, she had asked her mother about paying Larry and Lydia a visit in Upper Inkcome. '*Oh – they sold up and moved away,*' she had told her outright. '*They moved somewhere up north,*' she had added hurriedly.

People were always moving up north, thought Rachel ruminatively.

Stuck down south in Lower-Inkcome-by-the-sea, Rachel wished for her old life back. Her friends hadn't called in over two months, and not one of them had come down for a visit – or even a sleepover.

However, on one special occasion, Stewart had lied to his mother, and he'd sneaked away to visit her down by the seafront, but somehow she had found out, and he was well and truly grounded after that.

There wasn't a day that went by when she hadn't thought about the island and the deserted town of Little Inkling, and she wondered if she had imagined it all, but the scar on her left hand wouldn't let her forget.

The bedroom door rattled.

'Do you hear me in there?' Lorraine cawed. 'WAKEY, WAKY – RISE AND SHINE,' she added booming.

Rachel rolled over and tucked herself into the foetal position, closed her eyes and tried to keep her breathing on an even keel.

'It's another beautiful morning,' Lorraine remarked as she tried to open the obstinate bedroom door. With another hefty shove, the door flew wide open so hard it catapulted the starfish doorknob through the air where it finally impaled a dirty white sock to the timber flooring.

So, in one fell swoop, her mother snatched the doorknob up off the floor and placed it out of harm's way on the chest of drawers. 'Well, *that's* another job for Paul to add to his list of things to fix.'

Rachel played possum.

Lorraine let out a resigned sigh and shook her head: her eyes followed the trail of wrinkled clothes that ended at her daughter's bedside.

Rachel pretended to snore. The smell of musky perfume grew that little bit stronger as her mother bundled up her discarded clothes.

'C'mon, sleepyhead – you have a big day ahead of you,' said Lorraine serenely and threw the bundle of clothes on top of the bunk bed, bent down and planted an affectionate kiss on her daughter's head. 'You *can't* fool me, Rachel – I know you're awake.'

Rachel arose and spluttered. Unable to contain herself, she rolled over and snatched a handkerchief from under a pillow. Burying her nose in the cotton cloth, she let out a muffled sneeze.

Lorraine sniffed her wrists.

Rachel wiped her nose. 'What perfumery are we *trying* to sell today, Mum?' she asked, thinking about her mother's fledgeling business.

Lorraine beamed. 'Well, on my left wrist we have a pinch of Catmint and Mugwort,' she said, 'and on my right, we have Skullcap and Willow.'

Rachel shied away from her mother's upturned wrists. 'I don't like any of them,' she told her bluntly. 'Which wrist does Dad prefer?'

Lorraine sighed and sat on the bed, almost kicking over one of the overflowing buckets as she crossed her long legs. 'I haven't seen him all morning,' she huffed. 'No doubt he's with the love of his life.'

Rachel grinned. Her father's new shed had become a home from home. The monstrous shed took up most of the back of their garden. Her mother didn't much care for his wooden masterpiece – but she knew that she must never come between a man and his shed.

Her mother had painstakingly rebuilt her rockery stone by stone, as the feckless deliverymen had thrown the shed's heavy lumber over their windswept fence, crushing her mother's labour of love.

Although it wasn't her father's fault, he still slept on the living room couch, as her mother's elephantine memory hadn't forgiven him yet.

'I hope Dad hasn't forgotten about today,' said Rachel.

A long, drawn-out harmonious tone drifted into the bedroom, and the front door juddered open with a big bang and a loud crash. 'THE VAN'S ARRIVED,' Paul bellowed up the stairs. 'BE BACK IN A MO, LOVE.'

'Talk of the devil,' Lorraine snorted. 'DON'T BE TOO LONG TALKING TO FABIO, PAUL – RACHEL HAS TO BE AT THE SCHOOL GATES BY NINE.'

'OKIDOKEY,' he shouted back and slammed the front door closed.

'It was nice of Mr Faramundo to give Dad a job,' said Rachel.

'We financed Fabio when his business was about to go under, and the bank turned him down,' Lorraine said. 'He's been grateful ever since.'

Rachel smelt the simmering salty sea breeze coming in through the cracked open window. Her niggling hunger pangs craved food, and she said resignedly, 'I s'ppose I'd better go down and have some breakfast.'

Lorraine giggled. 'Um – your father's already gone and eaten the lot,' she chortled. 'I'll go and make you some more while you take a shower.'

Rachel's stomach groaned in disappointment.

* * *

Rachel sat at the breakfast table. Nibbling on her jammy buttered toast, she began to memorise Gravelings' autumn term timetable. Five minutes had passed, and she let out a frustrated sigh and reread the classes and times for September. This wasn't like her at all: a few months ago, she could remember anything for an eternity, but since leaving the island, her gift of recall had diminished to such an extent, she could just about remember the front page of her father's newspaper.

Rachel shuddered at the thought of losing her gift, but she had to face facts that maybe she was just an ordinary ten-year-old girl with an ordinary life – and she had to be prepared for that.

Lorraine rushed into the room. 'Here's your cuppa,' she spouted, plonking the overflowing brew and saucer well away from her daughter's new grey backpack. 'Ah, I see you have Chemistry at eleven?'

'Yes, but it won't be the same without Mr Luddy,' Rachel replied.

Lorraine stifled a chuckle but grinned.

Rachel glared back at her mother, knowing she knew some serious gossip to unleash and asked, 'OK, Mum – let's hear the latest rumour?'

Lorraine quickly pulled up a chair. 'Well, Vivian Harlequin phoned me up the other night to tell me the good news,' she said all of a quiver. 'Edwin Luddy will be teaching at Gravelings from now on.'

'I – I don't believe it,' said Rachel, amazed at her mother's latest revelation of idle tittle-tattle. 'But why did he leave Plums, Mum?'

Lorraine drew Rachel close as if the walls would be interested in their hushed conversation. 'Apparently, Lucinda and Edwin had a blazing row at Plums,' Lorraine whispered. 'From what Vivian told me, Lucinda burst out of her office in tears and ran into the girls' toilets.'

'I can't remember a day when those two weren't at loggerheads,' said Rachel perturbed. 'I wonder what they were arguing about this time.'

The Cooks' cuckoo clock suddenly whirled on the wall.

A dishevelled peeling songbird sprang out on its rusty-coiled spring, squawking as it bounced up and down. It screeched another seven times, blew a rude raspberry and then sprang back into its pine home.

'Paul needs to get that clock fixed,' moaned Lorraine irritably. 'I'll never understand his obsession with book fairs and rummage sales. We have enough rubbish of our own without giving others a home, and we don't have any more space – and our attic is chock-a-block.'

Rachel listened expectantly. 'Our clock's running a bit early,' she began, but she grinned on hearing their doorbell ring. 'Toby's dead on time again – I don't know how he does it. I'll go and get the post, Mum.'

At the front door, Rachel struggled to pull it open – but it bounced back almost throwing her against the wooden bannisters. 'Hiya, Toby,' she puffed, smiling at her postman in his neatly pressed uniform.

Toby tipped his imaginary hat at her. 'Hullo, Rachel – you're up with the lark this morning,' he said in his smooth Irish brogue, swishing his long quiff of black hair out of his deep-set brown eyes.

'It's my first day at school,' Rachel replied, 'and I don't want to be late,' she added in an overbearing voice, hoping her father had overheard her blatant hint, but Fabio held him deep in conversation.

Booming voices cut short their discourse, and she peered at the refuse lorry that rumbled slowly up the road, lumbering over the speed bumps.

'Good morning, Toby,' Lorraine said over Rachel's shoulder. 'I wonder what wonders you have for us in that sack of yours.'

'Looks like another bunch of bills, Mrs Cook,' said Toby glumly, handing her a wad of brown envelopes held fast by a thick rubber band. 'Oh, and this red envelope is from the local council. It looks like they want to bleed us folks even drier.'

'What do you mean, Toby?'

'The entire town's getting these demands this morning.'

'But we can't afford another rate rise,' said Lorraine thunderously.

'The council's getting desperate for money – and they even charged my wife's sister, Maggie, for staying with us for a month. Thankfully, she's going back home to Upper Inkcome tomorrow,' he told her with a sigh of relief. 'My dog, Paddy, won't be sorry to see her go, either. It's her perfume you see – it always brings him out in a nasty red rash.'

Lorraine's eyes shone with opportunity. 'Um – maybe Maggie would like a change of perfume,' she said and turned her wrists towards him.

Toby's nostrils turned upwards in utter disgust. '*Ugh – what on earth is that awful smell?*' he gagged uncontrollably and retched.

Rachel's nose curled up too as an unpleasant pungent pong stagnated by the front door, which refused to depart in the stiff breeze.

A man coughed. 'Sorry, Toby – but you've dropped something,' the roughly dressed man said and handed him a large grubby brown parcel. 'Morning, Mrs Cook – my, you're looking very smart, Rachel.'

'I'm wearing grey at Gravelings today, Mr Marsh,' she retorted.

'Morning, Pete,' sniffed Lorraine politely, but she shrunk away from his overpowering stench, and tried not to be too obvious as she tried desperately to close the front door to keep the binman's vile smell out.

'But – but I'm sure I didn't pick this parcel up on my round this morning,' Toby stressed, looking horrified as he just spotted a couple of strings of spaghetti dangling down his pristine jacket.

'I found the parcel down by the front gate,' Pete insisted, glancing down at his watch, shaking his head worriedly. 'Right, I better get going – I'm running late again, and I have a pick up at number thirty-three.'

'*Oh, my – oh, my,*' squeaked Toby. 'I'm going to be late, too,' he added in sheer panic, plonked the brown parcel into Rachel's surprise hands and belted across the Cook's garden, hurdled over their fence, staggered, and almost slammed into the side of the shocking pink ice-cream van.

'See you in two weeks, Mrs Cook,' said Pete pleasingly. 'Well, it might be four if the council gets its way,' he added grimly and trotted towards his bin lorry, shouting at his workmate to grab the Cooks' rubbish bags.

Rachel did a double-take and reread the parcel's name and address:

To: Miss Rachel Cook

Willows End

11 Forestry Glen

Lower-Inkcome-by-the-sea

Her hands trembled as she slowly unwrapped the slightly damp parcel.

Lorraine gasped as Rachel held out her raggedy backpack. The honey stain from her father's amber nectar hadn't washed out in the lake, and with nervous anticipation, she untied the straps and reached inside.

'Is – is it in there?' asked Lorraine apprehensively.

'No, Mum – your wedding ring isn't here,' replied Rachel dejectedly, but she felt something else instead and pulled out her grandmother's birthday present. To her utter amazement, the torch hadn't rusted and still worked. Even in the sunlight, its ray of amber light illuminated their warped gate and her father's scruffy shoes.

'Toby is in a bit of a rush this morning,' Paul sniggered as he came up the garden path. 'Dear, dear me – looks like he's dropped one of his red envelopes,' he added gleefully, picking it up off the long dewy grass.

Lorraine just glared at him.

'Now, what did I do?' Paul exclaimed, looking bewildered.

Rachel broke the stilted silence. 'I got my backpack back, Dad,' she beamed, swinging the backpack in front of his eyes. 'It's as good as new, well, apart from the honey stains and a touch of mildew.'

'Is the wedding ring –?' Paul began.

Lorraine just shook her head, choking back her tears.

Paul gave Lorraine an apologetic smile and gently took her hand. 'There's a memory I want to give you,' he told her tenderly, smiling up into her distraught face, circling her wedding finger with his forefinger. 'Like the moon around the earth, whenever you feel the loss of your ring, remember my love will encircle your finger and your heart forever.'

Lorraine welled up and threw her arms around him. 'You always said the right thing to me, but back then I was too stupid to listen,' she sniffed and kissed him on the lips and hugged him again.

Rachel groaned with embarrassment. 'Mum, Dad – *the neighbours are still putting their bins out*,' she hissed at them. 'You're not invisible!'

'What's the address on the envelope?' Lorraine asked, pulling away.

Paul's face turned sour. 'Number thirty-five,' he told her glumly.

'Paul – it's been almost a year since they barred you from *The Golden Toad*,' Lorraine huffed. 'Why don't you let bygones be bygones, eh?'

Paul shrugged his shoulders. 'Don't you think Rachel should be the one to deliver the envelope to *those* two,' he said peevishly, nodding his head towards the road. 'I'm getting fed up with all this secrecy.'

Rachel hadn't the foggiest idea what her parents were on about.

'I s'ppose there's no time like the present,' Lorraine sighed. 'OK, Rachel, I'll keep your backpack safe, while you go and deliver this letter to number thirty-five. The Nutty Pine's just a short walk down the road.'

Rachel gave the envelope the quick once over and studied the neat handwriting that appeared familiar, but she couldn't place the sender:

To: Morag Nook & Elspeth Cranny

The Nutty Pine

35 Forestry Glen

Lower-Inkcome-by-the-sea

'Now, Rachel, just make sure you hand-deliver this envelope,' Lorraine insisted. 'Knock as hard as you like – they're both a little bit deaf.'

'But what if Morag and Elspeth aren't in?'

'Oh, I think you'll find someone will be in.'

* * *

As Rachel walked along the undulating pavement, she thought about her parents' wedding anniversary bash that never happened and the crystal honey jar and diamond ring that hadn't turned up in her backpack.

Brushing those unhappy thoughts aside, she quickened her pace and watched her neighbours busying themselves with their daily chores.

Over at number fifteen, the Shuttlecocks were manhandling their old patchwork sofa out of the front door, shouting at their small terrier, Terrence, who thought it was the best game ever.

Waving at Mrs Muckle at number twenty-three, Rachel wondered how she and her husband coped with so many children underfoot. As she marched towards number thirty-five, she took in her surroundings.

On the day of their arrival, her parents had told her the treehouses in the Forestry Glen were very cheap but certainly not cheerful. Every house had a tree in its grounds; the trees were protected by law and couldn't be chopped down, or harmed in any way, however, that hadn't stopped the developers from building in the leafy glen. Bricks and mortar surrounded every tree to create an urban treehouse for the not so well off.

Messrs Wattle & Daub, their estate agents, were desperate for a sale and promised her parents that none of the trees had grown or shrunk in

donkey's years. They said it was *something* to do with the *unusual* soil in the glen, and they had urged her parents to sign on the dotted line.

Rachel unlatched the Nutty Pine's gate, closed it and peered up at the towering treehouse (their woody home rose higher than her own home).

Their spick and span pine treehouse had plenty of porthole windows, and their plush raised garden beds blossomed with colour and variety. Their pristine front door appealed to her immediately, and she admired the stained glass window that depicted a squirrel eating a pinecone.

Rachel knocked, but nobody answered; she sighed and knocked twice as hard, but still, nobody came to the door. In frustration, she banged on their front door with a clenched fist until it finally swung open.

'I'M NOT DEAF YOU KNOW,' the young boy mumbled disgruntledly with a toothbrush lodged in his mouth. Froth dribbled down his chin and down his grey school uniform. His toothbrush fell out of his mouth and hit the pine flooring with a sharp crack.

Rachel's eyes welled up. 'George – *is that really you under that school uniform?*' she asked in shock, wanting to pinch herself just to make sure she wasn't dreaming that her missing friend stood right in front of her.

'Is that really you, Rachel – without any mud on you?' he retorted.

Rachel threw her arms around him and hugged him. '*I've really missed you, you know,*' she whispered, but two pairs of eyes loomed beside them.

'Sorry to interrupt,' said the woman with the dull grey eyes with matching dull grey hair, 'but George needs to get ready for school.'

Rachel broke the hug, looking half embarrassed as she stepped back, splitting George's toothbrush in two. A red-haired woman, with piercing green eyes, bent down and picked the felled toothbrush up off the floor.

'I'm pleased to make your acquaintance at last,' said the grey-eyed woman, giving her a broad but reserved smile. 'I'm Morag Nook – and this is my sister Elspeth Cranny,' she added with a courteous nod.

'Please to meet you,' Rachel beamed, shaking their hands.

'George has been staying with us for a few weeks now,' said Elspeth, flicking her waist-long red hair to one side. 'Now, I think we've done quite a good job smartening him up since he came into our care.'

'My hair was my best feature,' George chuckled.

'I'm surprised you could see where you were going with that long mop hanging over your shoulders and bushy eyebrows,' scoffed Morag. 'I should have turned you over and used you to clean the kitchen floor.'

The cuckoo clock on the wall whirled. A majestic songbird glided out and sung a mellifluous array of notes. It sang another seven of them and glided back into its shuttered pine home.

Morag checked her wristwatch. 'Late again,' she bemoaned.

'Right, first thing tomorrow, I'm going to take that cuckoo clock back to the pawnshop,' Elspeth told Morag petulantly. 'I'd rather have our old clock back, even if it looked dishevelled and blew raspberries at us.'

'Oops, I almost forgot,' said Rachel. 'Toby dropped this on his round,' she added and handed Morag the red envelope.

Morag's face looked puzzled. '*It can't be,*' she gasped.

Elspeth peered over Morag's shoulder in awe. '*Bless my soul,*' she said, appearing overwhelmed. 'The envelope must be at least ten years old, so another half an hour won't make any difference. But first, our charge needs a new toothbrush and a crisp clean jumper.'

'Gladys won't be pleased if you're not on time for your ride,' Morag told George. 'Your new headmaster's a stickler for punctuality, too.'

Rachel had a thought. 'George, why don't you ride in the van with us this morning? Dad can get us to the school gates in no time,' she offered.

George gave her a surprised look. 'So, your father's van has flashing blue lights and a siren?' he asked her frivolously, sounding unconvinced.

'No, but his colourful ice-cream van will distract the schoolchildren long enough, so we can get through the gates and into assembly on time.'

* * *

Rachel dashed back towards her house.

A pair of legs protruded from the underside of the ice-cream van. Her father banged his head and then cursed as his wrench fell onto his chest.

'Dad is there a problem with the van?' she asked apprehensively.

Hot and sweaty, Paul rolled out from underneath the van, struggling to get up as his right leg had gone to sleep. He rubbed his greasy baldpate with an even oilier hand and puffed, 'No problems at all – just tightening up the brake hoses and a few other odd jobs that need doing.'

'You better get your skates on, Paul,' said Lorraine, who had spent a few frustrating minutes cleaning out the back of the untidy van. 'You've got roughly half an hour to get Rachel safely to the school gates,' she added cajolingly, giving him a flannel for his grubby face and hands.

'Oh, I've told George we would give him a lift,' said Rachel.

'Yes, of course, Rachel,' replied Lorraine. 'Look, I'm sorry for keeping you in the dark about him. Well, it was better for him – you know.'

'I know that now,' she said, returning her mother's warm smile.

'Take good care of him, Rachel,' said Lorraine guardedly. 'Trust me, you really don't want the wrath of Morag and Elspeth on your doorstep.'

At number thirty-three, the refuse lorry screeched to a halt.

'Oh, fiddlesticks,' barked Lorraine. 'Start the van up, Paul – I forgot the kitchen dustbin. Now, wait here, and I'll go and get it.'

Lorraine took to her heels and ploughed through the front gate.

Rachel pulled herself inside the van. She had just brushed the last bits of a crushed ice-cream cone out of the passenger seat when her mother came thundering into the cul-de-sac with a hefty black sack in hand.

'All aboard the ice-cream express,' Paul announced. He started the engine, and the van chugged into life. 'Bung the bag in the back, love.'

'Good luck at school, Rachel,' said Lorraine and waved her goodbye.

Scraping the bottom of the van over a steep speed bump, they edged towards Mr Mallings house at number thirty-three. Pete Marsh and his workmate piled rubbish bag after plastic rubbish bag into the back of the lopsided lorry that looked ready to keel over in the slightest gust of wind.

Harold Higgins, the Cook's elderly next-door neighbour, gave the men a quick wave as he struggled along the pavement with Wilberforce, who he kept on a taut leash. The white bulldog took every opportunity to pounce on anything that took its fancy. Through the rusty iron fence at number thirty-one, Wilberforce push his pudgy nose through the bars, and its mouth chomped down on Mrs Turner's prized rhododendrons, but Harold managed to pull him back onto the pavement.

Pete rubbed his hands down his filthy jacket and shook Mr Mallings' hand. Paul floored his van, not wanting to miss Pete's departure.

A black blur suddenly darted out of Mr Mallings' property.

'DAD, LOOK OUT!' Rachel bellowed.

Paul slammed on the brakes. The van lurched then shuddered. '*The brakes aren't working!*' he cried out in alarm, and the van sped onwards.

At that moment, a loose box of chocolate flakes gained momentum and crashed into the dashboard. Smashed to smithereens, the flakes split open, and chunks of chocolate tumbled into the steering wheel's column.

'*Now the steering wheel's stuck,*' Paul shrieked, and they hit the high kerb with an unnerving crunching sound and landed on the pavement.

With wild eyes, Paul applied the brakes again – but to no avail.

With another juddering jolt, the van's twin loudspeakers switched on.

Like a deer in headlights, Harold stood frozen to the spot as the van sped towards him – blasting out Greensleeves as it went hell for leather.

Rachel had to act fast, so with her hands tightly wrapped around the handbrake, she pulled it back with all her might.

Harold screamed and threw himself over Mrs Turner's iron fence, flattening her prized rhododendrons, which left Wilberforce to face the music, which, by accident, had skipped to Waltzing Matilda.

The van wobbled like a jelly pudding and then teetered on two wheels.

Wilberforce just stared at the wayward van, seemingly unaware of the danger it was in, so Rachel pulled even harder on the handbrake, and as the van skidded, it suddenly spun off the pavement and into a speed bump – missing Wilberforce by a gnat's whisker.

The van came to a crunching stop, but its airbags failed to deploy; however, the Cooks' rubbish bag had a life of its own and took flight, finally smacking into the back of Paul's head, which launched him over the steering wheel and into the nodding dog on the dashboard.

Noxious fumes of perfumery filled the interior.

'I CAN'T BREATHE,' Paul spluttered and threw the door open, pulling Rachel out with him, but he misjudged the step and toppled into the road.

'Dad – are you all right?' she screamed, leaning against the van, sucking in the invigorating sea air like no tomorrow.

'Yuck – it's all over me,' he replied nauseatingly.

Rachel glanced down at her father and the rubbish bag that had broken his fall, but it had split open under his portly weight. Paul got up on all fours, glaring down at the sticky substances that clung to his shirt.

The sea breeze changed direction, and she smelt the awful aroma.

'Ugh – I'm covered in some kind of ketchup – and what's this yellow goo?' Paul blustered and got onto his knees, grabbed a crumpled serviette and wiped the slimy globules off his face and neck.

However, at that precise moment, a rotund white head rounded the van. Wilberforce's tongue slobbered out of its mouth as it spotted Paul.

The dog wasted no time and charged at him.

Rachel took to her heels and flung herself after its trailing leash.

'GET IT OFF ME – GET IT OFF ME,' Paul shouted, but the ravenous dog continued to lick him to death.

Rachel pulled on the leash; however, Wilberforce wasn't giving up its maniacal desire for the free mushy food plastered over her father –

Then, to her left, another pair of hands wrapped around the leash.

With his wild, harried blue eyes bulging out on stalks, Harold joined Rachel, and he bellowed frantically into her ear, 'READY... 1... 2... 3...'

With their combined effort, Wilberforce soon collapsed to the ground, but the dog immediately let out a low groan, as if it had a severe stomach ache. Its reddening, watery eyes rolled back and forth. It staggered to its feet, appearing confused, but it suddenly looked longingly into Paul's

face. Paul didn't like the look that had come over the dog, and he barely got to his feet in time as Wilberforce woofed and barrelled towards him.

Caught off guard by the dog's sudden burst of energy, Rachel and Harold's hands burned as the leash flew out of their sore, sweaty hands.

'Sorry I'm late, Mr Cook – I mislaid my new watch –' George began, but he jumped out of Paul's way with Wilberforce swiftly gaining on him.

Paul dodged sideways and crashed through The Nutty Pine's gate.

By their open front door, Morag and Elspeth's eyes looked on in sheer astonishment and watched with open mouths as Paul tore across their flowerbeds. He hadn't given them a glance or a moment's thought as he launched himself through the open door of their pine garden shed.

Flat on his back – and fighting to catch his breath – Paul screamed in terror as Wilberforce was almost upon him.

With his life flashing before his eyes, Paul kicked the door with such force, the door splintered as the dog's slobbering snout met it head-on.

Rachel, George and Harold ploughed through the open garden gate.

Morag and Elspeth quickly joined them as Harold's dizzy demented dog got up, scratched at the door and howled like a lovesick banshee.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tea and Tyranny

Lorraine coughed. 'Looks like the flu, Mr Pillings,' she sputtered into the phone. 'I think its catching... Yes – I'll keep you posted about tomorrow – goodbye,' she added with a husky voice and put the phone back down.

Rachel and George sat quietly on Morag and Elspeth's couch; their glum faces studied Lorraine, who looked most upset. Curled up into a ball, growling and twitching its paws, Flotsam carried on dreaming as it lay in Rachel's lap (however, its brother, Jetsam, had gone to another home that better suited its feisty and belligerent moods).

'I've just lied to your headmaster,' grumbled Lorraine, 'and it wasn't even a white one. So much for making a good first impression at school.'

Rachel plucked up a morsel of courage and said, 'It's Mr Mallings' fault, Mum. Dad wouldn't have slammed on the brakes if his scatty cat hadn't bolted out of the blue right in front of us.'

'At least Wilberforce's back in his kennel,' George added. 'It took all four of us to drag him away from the shed.'

'Did you speak to Stewart about the brakes on the van?' Lorraine asked Rachel. 'Your father needs to keep his job.'

'Yes, Mum, he's bunking off French,' she replied. 'His grandparents have agreed to bring him down without his mother's knowledge.'

Lorraine's eyes lit up. 'I haven't seen Bill and Bella in ages,' she said. 'I better tell your father, as he'll want to show off his baking prowess.'

Rachel stretched out her arms and stifled a yawn. 'Dad's probably going to be in the bath all morning getting rid of that awful smell,' she said and gave her hands a cautious sniff. 'I've just washed my hands, but they still smell a bit funny – what was in that rubbish bag, Mum?'

'Oh – just some medicine and jars of perfume,' she replied vaguely.

* * *

Elspeth disappeared into her mountainous airing cupboard and perused the stacked shelves. Shoving the lofty steel ladder along its metal rails, she finally staggered up the rungs and tottered back down with a tower of tea towels. 'Well, I think we can spare a few of these,' she snorted. 'Anyway, most of them are probably out of date by now, but your father and Stewart can at least make good use of them – and I'm sure Captain Eddie wouldn't mind them going to a good home.'

Rachel's puzzled expression vanished as Elspeth flashed a somewhat faded threadbare towel in front of her that had a beady-eyed red lobster on every corner, pointing its razor-sharp pincers at the fishy menu:

Captain Eddie's Fish Bar Restaurant

Our prices are as cheap as chips!

Welcome to our new menu. We pride ourselves on sourcing local produce. Please note that if you are unfortunate enough to have an allergic reaction to any of our dishes and are hospitalised, we will only charge you half price, and on your next visit, you'll receive a complimentary drink of our famous Lemon Sprat Tea.

*Freshwater Moon Jellyfish
Crab Cauldron Soup (Quite Spicy)
Organic Oysters in Pickled Orange Slices
Haddock Surprise in Prickly Pineapple Sauce
Honey Glazed Lemon Sole with Snail Dippers*

Please note that our dishes come with complementary Nettle Salad.

'Sounds delicious,' Rachel smirked.

'Eddie's always experimenting, so it's best to stick to the traditional dishes – you know – just to be safe,' warned Elspeth darkly. 'Bob Turner at number seventeen had the *Jumping Bean Fish Pie* a few months ago, and he's never been able to walk straight since.'

'Um – I think I'll give Captain Eddie's restaurant a miss,' said Rachel, feeling a bit queasy from reading his fanciful and dubious menu.

'Oh, don't worry, Rachel,' Elspeth informed her. 'As of last week, Eddie has a new trainee chef working for him,' she added chirpily. 'His aunt's an old friend of mine. He's just out of catering college and eager to try out his new culinary skills.'

Rachel still wasn't convinced.

Elspeth leaned in. 'If you mention my name – I'm sure he'll cook you some burger and fries,' she chuckled. 'Now, I'll take these towels down to George, and I'll get him to pop them around to your house.'

'Um – d'you mind if I wash my hands again?' Rachel asked. 'I can't seem to get the strange smell out of my skin.'

'That's OK,' said Elspeth. 'Here, take one of these towels and oh, be careful with the taps – the plumbing can be a bit temperamental...'

When Elspeth departed, Rachel marvelled at her ornate bathroom.

There wasn't an inch of pine on the walls: seashells of all shapes and colour covered the walls and ceiling. The opulent décor made the Cook's bathroom back in Princes Drive look decidedly drab. With four crystal chandeliers hanging down from the high vaulted ceiling, a barnacle-encrusted washbasin and a nautical-inspired cerulean marble bathtub as its centrepiece, their bathroom wasn't fit for a king – but a queen.

Decisions – decisions, Rachel thought, sniffing the bars of soap stacked high in the crab-shelled container that stood beside the washbasin. As she unwrapped her favourite smelly soap, the sporadic wind battered the window. Taking Elspeth's warning to heart, she slowly turned the hot tap on, but the plumbing just burped and fell silent, so she turned the cold tap on, but the pipes just groaned and shuddered.

A sudden gust of wind ruffled the dried seaweed blinds, knocking a red envelope onto the black and white whale-tiled floor. Another gust catapulted the envelope right under Rachel's left shoe, so she quickly grabbed the thick envelope off the floor and snatched the folded letter that had just fallen out of it. Ignoring her mother's stern, overly long lecture about eavesdropping and snooping on other people, she unfolded the paper and read the neatly written letter as the wind rattled the blinds:

To Morag & Elspeth:

My dearest friends, it brings me great sadness to inform you that I will probably never see you again. By the time you read this letter, I will be long gone. There's a chance I will reach our lands, but I must face facts that I'm on a fool's errand, and I will be forever lost in the mire.

As the scales tipped in our favour, we escaped like scared rabbits into the light and left them in darkness. I must bear the brunt of our disgrace. I believe cowardice lies in all our hearts, but only the weak allow it to thrive. I pray you will forgive my past transgressions that have brought us so much sorrow. I enclose a photograph of happier times. May Madeline's mercy save us from an eternity in the shadows.

Thomas

Rachel thought long and hard, berating herself as she tried to remember Larry's exact words back at Shire's Waterpark. Whirlpools the newspaper had reported; an accident by all accounts, but now she knew the truth.

She wondered if she should tell her mother the whereabouts of her brother, but she dismissed that thought, as Morag and Elspeth would have probably told her by now. With curious and nervous expectation, she pulled the photograph out of the envelope.

A double dome tent dominated the crowded scene. A gathering of happy faces, bulging boots, bulbous noses and oversized frizzy hair stood below a tall man, whose long beard was so thick and long, it appeared he had grown an upside-down Christmas tree on his chin.

By his side, a giant moustached man held twin girls aloft on his muscular biceps. At the head of the circus troupe, a suave man dressed in flamboyant breeches and tall boots cracked a whip at an invisible lion.

At the very front, a dwarf sat alone with his arms and legs crossed, his impatient face staring out of the picture.

Rachel brought the photograph right up to her nose – and a rush of recognition met her eyes. Goosebumps spread down her arms as she stared at the two girls who had the same grinning expression –

SCREACHHHHHHHHHH!

The water pipes shook violently.

Another screeching sound blasted out. Both taps suddenly burst into life, belching out a torrent of hot and cold water. Scorching steam shot skywards, smothering her hands and the black and white photograph.

She jumped backwards in shock, tripped over the red lobster chair and fell against the rim of the bath with a painful thud. With her head throbbing from her clumsy fall, susurrus sounds echoed all around her.

Rachel stared into the photograph where whispering echoes brought colour and life to the circus troupe who found their voice and spoke:

‘Are we almost ready, Mr Wyman?’

‘C’mon, Nettie, I can’t keep this face for long.’

‘Call that a whip, Clarence, it couldn’t calm an alley cat.’

‘Speak for yourself, Cecil, my June’s got redder lips than you.’

‘Right, take your places, everyone,’ a man boomed. ‘Now, I only have enough chemicals for one more photograph – so let’s make it count, eh.’

Out of the centre of the photograph, a young girl skipped towards a dwarf and sat beside him. Mimicking his posture, she crossed her legs, gave the invisible photographer the thumbs up, and smacked her lips against the dwarf’s craggy cheek.

Rachel choked, and a lump stuck in her throat. She felt her heart stopped beating as she recognised her deceased grandmother, Nettie,

whose smiling face looked out of the animated photograph that trembled and then exploded with a burst of blinding blue light.

Rachel felt woozy, the bathroom blurred and swirled, and she barely registered the door bursting open and the terrifying scream.

‘GET IT AWAY FROM HER – GET IT AWAY FROM HER!’

‘FLUSH IT DOWN THE TOILET – FLUSH IT DOWN THE –’

Rachel fought to stay awake, but her mind fogged over. A pair of warm hands gently cupped her head, and she felt droplets of warm water dripping down her flushed cheeks.

A faraway voice pleaded, ‘*Rachel, don’t you dare leave me –*’

Rachel heard no more as she felt her whole being falling into oblivion. Above her, the three faint shadows coalesced into dusty blackness, and as they crumbled away, she finally lost conciseness and blacked out.

* * *

‘I’ve just given her a sedative. She’ll sleep for a while.’

‘Is she... is she going to be all right?’

‘I don’t know, Lorraine – I really don’t know.’

‘She’s been fine – well, all apart from the nightmares.’

‘What nightmares?’

‘They began the day after we moved in – but...’

‘But what?’

‘One night, she screamed – she screamed out *their* name.’

‘My God – does he know?’

‘No, he’s completely in the dark.’

‘And we better keep it that way – at least for now.’

‘What about Gravelings and her education?’

‘Bellingtons would harness her gift, but Gravelings will do for now.’

‘Thank you, Doctor Gloucester. You’ve always been here for us and especially for Rachel when she was a baby.’

‘You remember Doctor Foster don’t you?’

‘Why, yes – Fidelia and I are old friends.’

‘How’s she keeping?’

‘She’s slowly getting better. The invigorating sea air is doing her a world of good. Now listen, Lorraine, I would like Fidelia to meet Rachel – just to give you a second opinion. But due to her ongoing illness, you would need to visit her at her place of residence.’

‘Where does she live?’

'She's renting a room above Captain Eddie's Fish Bar Restaurant.'
'Oh, yes – who could forget Eddie's restaurant.'
'Right, when you get to the restaurant, remember to say nothing at first. Just give Eddie my card and say Gilbert sends his regards...'

* * *

Lorraine sat down in her living room and stared up at the ceiling.
'She'll be fine,' said Paul softly, giving his wife a thoughtful glance as he entered the living room with a steaming cup of tea and an iced bun.
'Shall I check up on her again?'
'It's only been fifteen minutes since you last checked on her,' Paul told Lorraine. 'She's as tough as old boots,' he added firmly.
'*I know,*' she replied, sipping on her lukewarm tea. '*I worry too much.*'
Paul patted her on the back of her hand. He switched off the light and sat down beside her. When their leather sofa had finished wheezing, they leant back and watched the nine o'clock news.

* * *

Lorraine couldn't concentrate on the irreverent news anymore, so she made her excuses, slowly tiptoed up the creaky stairs and crept into her daughter's bedroom, but she needn't have bothered: slurping down a glass of ice-cold water, Rachel grinned and asked her mother for a refill.
Lorraine waited patiently for her to empty the second glass of water and without taking no for an answer, she pushed a glass thermometer into the corner of her daughter's dribbling mouth.
Ignoring her brittle stare, Lorraine puffed up the gaggle of pink goose down pillows, sat down on the bed and pulled the thermometer out of her daughter's mouth. 'Your temperature is almost back to normal,' she said with a sigh of relief. 'How do you feel, Rachel?'
'I'm feeling fine now, Mum,' she said brightly. 'What's the time?'
'Nine thirty, thereabouts.'
'So, what's wrong with me?'
'*You've had an allergic reaction,*' said Lorraine more tensely. 'Doctor Gloucester's bandaged up your frozen fingers, but we're getting a second opinion, so we're taking you to see Doctor Foster tomorrow morning.'
'*But what about school, Mum?*' Rachel blurted out.

'That's all taken care of,' said Lorraine placatingly. 'Your father's already spoken to Mr Pillings about your sudden illness.'

'Can I go and visit George tomorrow?'

'We'll see. Now, try and get some sleep.'

'I've had enough sleep,' Rachel huffed, still feeling a bit crotchety. 'Could you please bring me something to read,' she added more politely.

Lorraine stood up and gave her a sly smile. 'Why don't you look under your pillows,' she beamed. 'It's a little present from your father.'

As her mother shut the door, she tossed the pile of pillows aside until she found her father's present. Unwrapping the brown paper, she began reading *L.C Warbler: Birds of Prey for Beginners* with keen interest.

Her father's neatly written message lay inside the front cover:

To Rachel:

I found this little gem at last week's book fair. You asked about the wildlife down here, so I bought you this informative book to add to your growing collection of birds of prey.

I even got the author to sign it for you. By chance, I met him at the bus stop. Funny thing is, he seemed to know me and started talking about the good old days. I just humoured him and went along with it. He knows his birds all right, but I think he's as mad as a box of frogs.

Love

Dad.

Rachel read the first two chapters and snapped the book shut. Puffing up her pillows, she laid back down and thought about Thomas Shire's letter that had suddenly turned up after all these years; her uncle knew Morag and Elspeth well enough – well enough to tell them about his journey, but she wondered if her mother knew as well.

Turning this way and that, Rachel couldn't get comfortable no matter how much she fidgeted. Her troubled mind fought sleep, and she thought about her late grandmother and the dwarf she had kissed on the cheek. Moreover, she thought about George, and if she told him the truth about Thomas' animated photograph, he would probably think she was as mad as Lionel Chestnut Warbler.

* * *

What's keeping them? Rachel thought.

Her parents should be ready by now. Thoroughly bored, she began righting the rosy-cheeked garden gnomes that had lain face down in the dirt since last night's blustery gale. The town clock chimed eleven times.

We're going to be late, Rachel thought, but the front door flew open.

'C'mon, Lorraine – our ride will be here soon,' said Paul.

'Dad, why is your van up on blocks?' Rachel asked, looking worried.

Paul craned his head. 'Stewart couldn't fix it the other day,' he told her inattentively, pushing up on his toes and peering down the road. 'He said the spare parts are really tough to get hold of, so he told us he's off to Gribble's scrapyard straight after school.'

I bet he's bunking off French again, Rachel thought.

Pulling the warped front door towards her, Lorraine swiftly locked it.

'So, how are we getting to the surgery?' Rachel asked.

'We're meeting Doctor Foster at her new lodgings – and we're taking the tram for this afternoon's appointment,' panted Lorraine. 'No doubt Gladys will get us there in no time at all – *ah, here she comes now.*'

Utterly confused about riding a tram through a town without tracks, Rachel followed her parents into the cul-de-sac. A squeal of brakes and somebody shouting, '*BLOODY MANIAC*' shattered the silence.

The smell of burning rubber wafted in their direction; unimpeded, a green tram sped over the speed bumps with a flock of seagulls in tow.

The Cooks leapt back as the tram hit the kerb with smouldering tyres.

Hundreds of bugs smothered the tram's number eleven placard, and even the windscreen had its fair share of squished insects. The tram's front tyres looked like paddles from a steamboat; however, its rear tyres resembled those used on a farm tractor. A ring of rubber tyres wrapped themselves around its riveted body. Covered with bird mess, desiccated crab shells, seaweed and a few other unmentionables, the tram had a surprising number of nautical pendants decorating its very cramped roof, which came with four brass foghorns and a wonky weather vane.

The tram trembled then rumbled.

Seagulls squawked and flew away as the tram door whooshed open. With timid steps, Lorraine edged closer and peered inside.

'Well, me dearies, are you coming aboard the number eleven or not?' asked a woman with a hearty laugh. 'I haven't got all day, you know.'

Lorraine took the plunge and boarded the tram that wasn't a tram.

Rachel followed her father through the tram door, and in the dingy light, she watched her mother hug the tram driver affectionately.

'Gladys,' Lorraine squealed in delight. 'It's been too long.'

'Lorraine, you've aged a bit – but in a good way,' Gladys remarked. 'There's not a grey hair on your head, and you've grown it long, too.'

Their warm embrace ended.

'Well, look who we have over here,' Gladys told Paul, her eyes welling up. 'Come over here and give me a hug and a kiss you old softy.'

Paul looked petrified and took a sharp step back. Lorraine touched Gladys's elbow and quickly shook her head.

'Oh, pardon me,' quipped Gladys all of a fluster.

'That's quite all right,' replied Paul and shook Gladys' rough hands, but he shied away from her as if she had some disease that was catching.

'And the young lady on the steps is Rachel – our daughter,' Lorraine told Gladys with parental praise and motioned Rachel to come forward. 'C'mon – don't be shy – Gladys is a very old friend of mine.'

'Hey – *less of the old*,' Gladys retorted.

Rachel took a step up, gave the rosy chubby-cheeked tram driver a smile and took in Gladys' unusual attire: a tarnished black leather belt held up her white canvas trousers, and her dark navy blue woollen blouse had shrunk down a size. Tied around her neckline, a black silk sailor's kerchief displayed a white anchor. On her head, she wore a stiff, flat wide-brimmed white straw hat with a blue ribbon tied around the crown.

'Please to meet you,' Rachel told her, shook her tattooed hand and thought, *Gladys wouldn't have looked out of place on an old whaling ship*.

'Your mother has told me all about you,' beamed Gladys.

'Not everything I hope,' replied Rachel shyly.

'No – just your bad points,' chortled Gladys mischievously.

Lorraine laughed, but Paul just stared at Gladys and gave her a funny look. 'I think we better get a move on,' he said churlishly. 'Rachel has an appointment with the doctor you know – and she needs to be on time.'

'You're quite right,' said Gladys and settled into her whale-boned inspired driving seat. 'Pick a seat in the middle if you want the best view of the town,' she added briskly. 'Watch out for the slippery seaweed on the starboard side, as I haven't had time to mop it all up after last night's tourist ride – and we were packed in here like sardines.'

Rachel settled down in the driest bucket seat and glanced out of the nearest porthole window. Her father sat beside her, but her mother sat behind Gladys, nattering away to her until the engine revved into life.

'Do you hear that?' Gladys asked her passengers.

Everyone listened.

Paul sighed. 'No – I can't hear anything,' he told her, slightly irked the tram hadn't budged at all.

'Well, of course, you can't hear anything,' Gladys chuckled, 'as the ship's engine is tuned to perfection –'

'– Now, hang on a mo,' Paul cut in, tilting his ruffled toupee to one side with keen curiosity. 'Hmmm... now that you mention it, I can hear a strange scrubbing sound – and there's an odd snapping noise, too.'

Rachel could hear it as well, but her father suddenly squealed and leapt onto his seat with eyes wild with fright.

'*D-down t-there on the p-port side,*' Paul stuttered, pointing at a dank pool of murky water that had an unsightly spume on its oily surface.

The water churned.

Rachel watched fascinated as a couple of beady yellow eyes protruded out of the water; the eyes blinked a couple of times, and a sliver of red armour emerged with a smattering of acorn barnacles on its back.

'What on earth's going on in the stern?' Gladys demanded.

'WEIRD CREATURE ON THE PORT SIDE!' Paul bellowed. '*It's got yellow eyes and a flat red face!*'

'Oh, that's just Nigel – he's my pet lobster,' Gladys snorted. 'He doesn't normally introduce himself to strangers. Now, are you sure you two haven't met before?' she added with a grin and a chuckle.

'W-what he doing in here – and d-down there?' Paul spluttered.

'He likes taking a bath in the bilge,' Gladys retorted. 'Just leave him be, and he'll soon wander off. OK, everyone, we're ready to cast off.'

Nigel sank slowly below the surface.

Paul got down into his seat, and Rachel helped him with his seatbelt.

His cheeks turned the colour of overripe blueberries as he breathed in, and she struggled to close the rusty buckle around his ample waist.

'*Welcome aboard my ship everyone,*' said Gladys gleefully, adjusting her oyster rearview mirror. 'Just like old times, Lorraine, eh?'

'Exactly like old times, Gladys,' she answered.

'Anchors aweigh!' Gladys trilled and put her foot down.

With oodles of curiosity, Rachel took in her strange surroundings: various buoys of all weird shapes and sizes hung down by coils of thick shipping rope. Back in the stern, odd fishing nets hung down from the ceiling and pinned precariously to the roof, grapnels and harpoons rocked violently from side to side as the tram hit every bump at speed.

Barely two minutes into the journey and Rachel wished she hadn't wolfed down her lumpy porridge at breakfast: Gladys hadn't stopped for anything as she had barrelled out of the Forestry Glen and headed towards the town like a woman possessed:

*Red traffic lights were treated as a suggestion
Cyclists were deliberately aimed for
Mini-roundabouts mowed down
Pedestrian crossings laughed at*

The tram whizzed through the streets of Lower-Inkcome-by-the-sea. Green about gills, Rachel hadn't watched the town go by and kept her head down, trying her hardest not to think about porridge and the slickly strawberry jam that went with it.

'We'll soon be at the seafront, Rachel,' said Paul, giving her hand an affectionate squeeze. 'We'll get the bus on the way back – I promise.'

* * *

Rachel staggered out the tram and sucked in the refreshing salty sea breeze that quickly quelled her queasiness. With her stomach settled, she approached her parents, who had just thanked Gladys for the lift.

'Now, don't forget to call me if you need a taxi service, a tour of the town or the isles,' Gladys told her parents, 'and that goes for you too, young lady,' she added with a nod and a broad smile at Rachel.

'How much do we owe you for the ride?' Lorraine asked.

Gladys just stood there. Her face filled with sadness and a single tear trickled down her cheek. 'Owe me – you don't owe me anything, Lorraine,' she added and threw her arms around her. 'Just the three of you being here is payment enough.'

'Now, don't be a stranger,' Lorraine added and pulled apart.

'I won't – and goodbye, Paul,' sniffed Gladys, her sadness still with her. 'It was nice meeting you.'

'You too, Gladys,' he replied, but he seemed far away as if he had just remembered something, and it was just on the tip of his tongue.

'Well, I must dash,' blustered Gladys, wiping her tear away. 'I have a few busy hours ahead of me and a pickup at Gravelings at four o' clock – and with the high winds forecast, it's going to be a treacherous journey across the causeway and through the sand dunes to Gribble's scrapyard.'

* * *

The diminutive red and black bricked building looked a sorry sight. Even its twin chimneys, which belched out a torrent of tarry smoke, seemed ready to topple over if someone happened to sneeze close by. The austere Victorian fish bar restaurant appeared out of place stuck in amongst the gaudy seaside shops and amusement arcades.

Parked precariously in a disabled space, a man scratched his baldhead and yawned as he leant against a long silver Rolls Royce. He placed his peaked-cap back onto his head and buried it into his newspaper.

‘C’mon – the entrance is this way,’ said Lorraine, leading them down a dozen well-worn steps that led down to Eddie’s place of business.

Rachel read the restaurant’s sign that swung above the door:

Captain Eddie’s Fish Bar Restaurant

Our prices are as cheap as chips!

Rachel grinned on reading the scrawled words at the foot of the sign:

Burnt offerings our speciality

Lorraine went to open the restaurant’s door, but she held back, startled by a man’s sweaty, pale face and pudgy nose pressed up against the glass that sweltered with slick condensation. The rotund man flung open the door, looked them up and down and barked, ‘Well, have you booked?’

‘Well, no – we’ve come to see –’ Paul began.

‘Yes, yes – I know why you lot are here,’ he told them.

‘You do,’ Paul replied, a little surprised.

‘Don’t get me wrong – I’m grateful for your custom,’ he said, mopping his brow and bald head with a threadbare tea towel, ‘but you day-trippers all turn up at the same time.’

‘We’re not day-trippers,’ Paul seethed, staring the man down.

‘We’ve just moved here,’ Rachel added.

‘Gilbert sends his regards,’ Lorraine informed him more calmly and handed over Doctor Gloucester’s card.

The man’s face completely changed. ‘Well now, that’s a different kettle of fish,’ he chuckled. ‘Please to meet you. I’m Captain Eddie, and may I be the first to welcome you to my humble establishment,’ he added in an overinflated voice that rumbled with merriment.

There were smiles all around – except for Paul, who looked like he was chewing a couple of wasps.

Oblivious to Paul's gruff manner, Eddie beamed and held the door open. 'Come in, come in,' he said speedily, ushering them into his overheated establishment whose excited patrons made a right old racket.

Rachel felt the baking heat as it hit her full on. Well away from the crowds, two humungous hearth fires roared away. Bursting at the seams, there didn't look like any elbowroom left in Eddie's restaurant.

'I'll tell Fidelia you're here,' said Eddie. 'Can I say who's calling?'

'Tell her an old friend is here,' replied Lorraine hesitantly. 'No – tell her *The Lady in the Lake* wishes to see her,' she added mirthfully, giving him an impish grin, but her eyes were on Paul, who appeared ready to pass out from the searing heat of Eddie's hectic restaurant.

'OK, will do,' said Eddie, wiping his sweaty hands down the front of his dirty apron that smelt decidedly odd.

'Oh, before you go, Eddie – can we go downstairs?' Lorraine urged. 'It's stifling in here, and you couldn't swing a cat.'

Eddie's face dropped like a stone, and he went very pale. 'Downstairs you say – um...' he mumbled worriedly, wringing his hands. 'It's full of tourists you know – and there's a darts match going on.'

'Nevertheless, we'll be going downstairs,' Paul told Eddie bluntly, waving his excuses aside. 'Darts match, you say. I haven't played in years, but I bet I could give your patrons a run for their money.'

'OK – if you insist,' Eddie trembled. 'Um, I believe table three is free – and it's miles away from the window.'

* * *

The uneaten nettle salad and empty glasses at table three disappeared; rushed off her feet, the waitress whirled in between the customers and shot through the swinging doors and into the bustling kitchen.

Rachel took in the squalid surroundings: four fishermen loitered near a smouldering fireplace; behind them, a couple of old-timers bent over a faded draughtsboard, and pot-bellied men, with silver-grey beards, threw darts at a battered board and the poster above it that advertised *Pirates' Night down at the Grumpy Sailor* public house. The rest of Eddie's patrons mostly kept to themselves, supping on their cheap fermented brew, while tipsy tourists clumped together like clay figurines.

Rachel watched with interest as a flustered waitress strutted out of the kitchen in a mad rush. 'No, Eddie – I've finished my shift,' she said

in a furious temper, fixing her coat and throwing her handbag over her shoulder. 'It's utter chaos upstairs – worse than last year.'

'But Joyce – you know it's impossible to get trained staff at this short notice,' griped Eddie fretfully, looking like a puppy that had lost its toy.

'*Short notice – short notice,*' barked Joyce hysterically. 'You've had a year, Eddie – a year to get someone fully trained, and you know this day's busier than Christmas.'

'But – but she'll be here soon,' he pleaded, his hands clenched as if in prayer. 'Can't you stay and train her for... say, for an hour or two?'

'*She's almost eleven, Eddie,*' Joyce screeched, 'and you're treating her like a skivvy. I bet your grandfather treated his staff better than you do.'

Crestfallen by her cutting remark, Eddie's lower lip began to tremble.

Joyce sighed, and she took a deep breath. 'All right – an hour – but no more,' she demanded with a disgruntled huff, turned and headed back towards the kitchen, but she suddenly stopped and faced him. 'And – and I want Sunday afternoons off from now on.'

Eddie spluttered and looked quite ill.

Joyce stepped up to him. 'Oh, and another thing,' she said, narrowing her eyes, pressing her finger lightly into his stout chest. 'From now on, you're going to pay her brother as well – even if it's in crayons.'

Joyce departed back into the kitchen, and left Eddie to deal with the commotion at table nine...

* * *

'I don't know about you two – but I'm famished,' said Lorraine, grabbing the overly bright menu. 'Hmmm – the specials look interesting,' she added, squinting at the chalk blackboard through the smoky room.

'I'm getting a tad peckish, too,' said Paul. 'Where's that waitress.'

Rachel rocked her head back and forth, hoping to catch a glimpse of the new trainee chef, but another coachload of rowdy tourists piled into the room with bubbly blabbing voices.

'THANK GOD YOU'RE HERE,' Eddie bellowed above the ruckus.

'SORRY – BUT MUM COULDN'T FIND A DISABLED PARKING SPACE.'

'OK, YOU'RE HERE NOW. I'LL GO AND TELL MARY TO WAIT ON TABLES UPSTAIRS. LOOKS LIKE TABLE THREE'S READY TO ORDER...'

'Well, I think we can all agree it's all round?' Paul pronounced.

Rachel and Lorraine nodded their approval.

'What about you, Rachel – have you decided what you want to eat yet?'
Lorraine asked her raucously, shouting above the room's hullabaloo.
'I think I'll have a burger and fries, Mum,' she replied shrilly.
'I didn't see that mentioned on Eddie's menu –' Paul began.
'Oh, that's quite all right – I'll get our new trainee chef to order –'
'Alice!' Lorraine squealed at the waitress who had elbowed a backpack and its ambivalent owner out of the way.

Rachel didn't know what to say as Alice Winterbright stood before her. With Alice's natural auburn hair grown back into a plunging Bob, it appeared unnaturally bright compared to her dreary red lobster stamped green uniform that reeked of grease and other strange smells.

'Good morning, Mrs Cook, Mr Cook,' said Alice tiredly. *'Hullo, Rachel – it's been a long time – how are you?'*

At that moment, Rachel would've rather stared into the sun than her friend's piercing green eyes. *'I'm fine, Alice,'* she said at last.

'How's your mother doing, Alice?' Lorraine asked her, breaking the uncomfortable silence. *'Is Grace's treatment helping at all?'*

'No – and her illness is getting worse,' she sniffed.

'If there's anything we can do, Alice?' Lorraine offered.

Rachel felt miserable at hearing Alice's news.

Alice gave Lorraine a weak smile. *'Mum drove me into work this morning,'* she told her. *'She's upstairs with Doctor Foster. I know people say her medical practices are a bit, well, you know – odd, but we're willing to try anything right now. So much for the luck of the Irish –'*

Rachel's eyes went blind.

'I hope you've cleaned your hands?' asked Alice firmly.

The pungent scent of lavender nestled on Rachel's nostrils and a boy giggled then whispered in her ear, *'Guess who?'*

Rachel's heart sank: she hadn't heard that voice for well over a year. With her eyes back in the daylight, the young boy immediately threw his arms around her neck and said, *'I've missed you so much, Rachel.'*

Rachel returned Jacob's embrace. *'I've missed you, too,'* she told him, and she really meant it. *'Your wheelchair's gone, and you're walking,'* she added fondly, released his hug and peered into his brilliant blue eyes.

'I've been walking for six months,' Jacob grinned.

'And running for two,' Alice imparted.

'I'm now captain of the school's football team,' Jacob added.

'There, you see, I always knew you were destined for greater things,' Rachel chuckled, lightly punching the boy's shoulder in jest.

'You're a bit young to be working here, Alice?' Lorraine asked.

'Mum's illness means she can't work anymore,' she replied, 'and we need the extra money what with all the bills coming in at this time of year. Eddie doesn't put me through the books, so it's all cash in hand –'

'OI, WAITRESS – HOW ABOUT GETTING SOME SERVICE AT TABLE SEVEN,' a boy's jocular voice bellowed across the room. 'MY STOMACH'S DESPERATE FOR HAMBURGER AND FRIES.'

'WE'RE TREATED LIKE ROYALTY AT THE GRUMPY SAILOR – PERHAPS WE SHOULD TAKE OUR BUSINESS THERE?' the boy beside him shouted even louder and with a wider grin.

Alice groaned and rolled her eyes. 'Jacob would you please go and see to the gentlemen at table seven,' she said despairingly, 'and tell them I'll be along shortly. Oh, and tell Eddie his nephews are here.'

Jacob gave Rachel another hug and rushed over towards table seven.

'Sorry about that – now, what can I get you?' Alice asked them.

'Um – I think I'll have the Crab Cauldron Soup,' said Paul.

Alice tilted her head towards him. '*Speak up – I can't hear you,*' she told him, losing patience with the boisterous tourists.

Paul huffed then bellowed as loud as he could, 'I'VE CHANGED MY MIND – I'M GOING TO HAVE THE HADDOCK SURPRISE.'

The room fell deathly silent; tourists shuffled nervously on their feet and stared disconcertingly at the Cooks. Over to their left, somebody sobbed, and somebody behind them said, '*How brave...*'

The uncomfortable silence ended, as the gentlemen at table seven started clapping and whooping, which ended when they gave the Cooks an approving smile and the thumbs up.

* * *

'Is everything all right with your food,' Eddie asked the Cooks.

'Lovely burger, Eddie,' Rachel replied. 'My compliments to the chef.'

'And for you, Mrs Cook?' Eddie asked, waiting on tenterhooks.

'I've never tasted fish fingers like yours,' replied Lorraine with all honesty. 'The beer-battered coating was exceptional, but the liquorish centre was a complete surprise,' she added and gulped down her cold tea.

Eddie grinned. 'And how was your food, Mr Cook?' he asked.

Paul let out a deflated groan, and his eyes glazed over.

'He absolutely loved it,' Lorraine told him, 'but it's rude to talk with your mouth full. When Paul's ready to talk – you'll be the first to know.'

'I'm sorry to trouble you, Eddie – but would you care to tear yourself away from your customers and attend my table.'

Eddie's merry face froze. Bent over and humbled, he made his way over towards the giant glass-domed window which revealed the picture-postcard estuary with its tributaries that teemed with aquatic life.

Rachel felt the cheery atmosphere leave the room.

'Y-your food is coming, y-your l-lordship,' said Eddie all of a quiver.

'I'm so glad to hear it, Eddie,' his lordship barked snidely, rustling his newspaper, turning a page with a deepening sigh. 'You know it's a pity that so many shops and restaurants are going out of business in these trying times. It would be a shame – a travesty in fact – if the council were to close down *your* fine establishment,' he added with veiled threat and rolled up his newspaper until it squeaked.

'Y-yes it would,' whimpered Eddie ingratiatingly.

His lordship just smiled and without batting an eyelid, whacked the fly that had dared to land on his table with his crisp newspaper.

Joyce whizzed past Eddie's prostrated pose. 'Pheasant and Pea soup for table eleven,' she puffed, keeping her head down and her eyes averted as she placed the steaming bowl down on the red tartan tablecloth.

His lordship poked his pinkie into his soup and sucked it clean. 'Oh, Joyce – what are we going to do with you,' he scowled. 'Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but did I, or did I not order the Pheasant and Pea soup?'

Joyce just stood there, unable to break her eyes away from his steely-grey eyes. Eddie took her arm and shook her back to her senses.

'Your chef must have a cold, Eddie, as it seems he can't smell or taste the difference between a grouse and a pheasant,' his lordship snapped.

'I'll go and get you another bowl of soup, your lordship,' said Eddie.

'That would be most gratifying,' his lordship retorted and offered the bowl to Joyce. 'I believe your father's getting released from prison?'

'Yes, your lordship – he's getting out tomorrow,' she replied meekly.

'Here, give this bowl to him. I'm sure he'll appreciate the thought,' he told Joyce with a cruel smile laced with malice. 'I hope he won't hold a grudge against me for putting him away for all those years?'

'No, your lordship,' Joyce snivelled, shaking as she took the bowl from him. 'The eleven-year sentence was most lenient.'

'C'mon, Joyce – let's get Henry another bowl of –' Eddie began, but he realised his monumental mistake at once.

Rachel suddenly recognised Henry Silverback as he shot to his feet and slammed his fists down on the table in a fit of rage. His florid face snarled back at Eddie, thundering uncontrollably, 'IF YOU EVER – EVER

ADDRESS ME LIKE THAT AGAIN – I’LL FEED YOU TO THE DOGS – DO YOU HEAR ME? NOW – GET OUT OF MY SIGHT AND GET ME MY SOUP!’

‘At once, your lordship,’ Eddie blubbered, and both he and Joyce scampered towards the kitchen through the stunned crowd.

With an air of indifference, Henry disregarded the open-mouthed patrons and sat back down; he began reading his crumpled newspaper as if nothing had happened. Her mother watched Henry with venomous eyes, and even her father glared at him in utter disgust.

The chill and the stillness in the room remained as Henry slurped down his piping hot soup. Supping down the dregs of her tea as quietly as she could, Rachel heard a right old kerfuffle coming from the stairs.

‘But, Joyce,’ said Eddie pleadingly. ‘Let’s talk this over...’

With tears running down her puffy face, Joyce hovered halfway up the staircase, but she managed to composed herself and blubbered, ‘I’m never coming back, Eddie – that was the last straw,’ she added and rushed up the stairs, leaving Eddie utterly bewildered and alone.

‘Oh, waitress – I’m ready for my main meal now,’ Henry barked at Alice. ‘As Joyce has flown the nest – be a good girl and bring me my Spaghetti Bolognese,’ he added in a surly condescending tone.

‘Yes, your lordship – I’ll see to it right away,’ Alice answered and dashed towards the kitchen, but Eddie crashed open the doors, almost knocking her over in his haste to get by.

With beads of sweat drooling down his face, Eddie hustled passed his customers with an overloaded plate of Spaghetti Bolognese. ‘*I have your meal here, your lordship,*’ he barked, snarling at anyone who hindered him.

But then, a slim bespectacled boy came crashing through the kitchen doors, losing his chef’s hat and breaking his glasses as he crashed into a barrel of cooking oil. ‘STOP HIM,’ he bellowed. ‘*He’s put rat poison in it,*’ he added desperately, his black-rimmed glasses hanging off his left ear.

At first, Rachel couldn’t quite believe what the boy had just said, but Eddie’s face looked murderous. Thinking on her feet, she took to her heels, dodged and barged her way through the tourists, caring not a jot about their spilt drinks, or cutting in on their private conversations.

‘Ah, Eddie – a man of your word,’ Henry chuckled as he approached table eleven like an angry whirlwind.

Rachel had little choice and went to rugby tackle Eddie, but she felt something cold and hard slam into her shin, and as she floundered, she grabbed hold of the nearest object to hand...

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

A Boring Tale

Rachel's shin smarted. Two pairs of hands helped her back up and onto her wobbly feet. The young gentlemen at table seven stood beside her with broad grins as they clapped and cheered her.

Right at the back of the room, the locals were beside themselves and shouted, 'ENCORE! ENCORE!' and right at the front, tourists reached for their cameras and phones and took endless pictures of table eleven.

The hubbub came to a sudden sharp end as a heavy chair scraped across the floor. Tight-lipped but fuming, Henry Silverback stood up.

Rachel turned around and met Henry's thunderous face.

Pieces of steaming stringy pasta and meat dripped down his slick black hair and onto his red tartan jacket and kilt. He eyed everyone in the room with vicious contempt as he slithered and slipped around his table.

Henry snarled at the room and said in a deadly tone, '*Mark my words – every last one of you is going to pay for this insult!*'

A peaked-cap man ran into the room. 'Your, lordship – I –' the man began, but he stared at Henry's tomato-splattered attire.

'What are you gaping at, Croom?' Henry barked at his open-mouthed chauffeur. 'Go and get the phantom started.'

'Y-yes, your l-lordship – um, at once, your lordship,' said Croom subserviently and ran back up the stairs like a scared rabbit.

'Excuse me, Henry – but haven't you forgotten something.'

Henry whirled around in a fit of rage, his red-stained teeth ready to tear apart the person who dared to disrespect his family's noble heritage.

Rachel matched his icy stare and stood squarely up to him. 'One should always keep good care of their possessions,' she said airily. 'If I'm not mistaken, Mr Silverback – I believe this is your property?' she added coolly and held out his slimy riding crop.

Henry hesitated, but with a savage sneer, he snatched the crop from out of her hand, turned around and traipsed towards the stairs, leaving the pungent smell of parmesan cheese in his wake.

* * *

'That was just amazing – but I think a custard pie to his face would have been even funnier.'

'It's about time someone stood up to Henry and put him in his place.'

'Best entertainment I've seen in years – and I really mean that.'

'I didn't know you had it in you, Rachel,' said Alice. 'Miss Pritchard's going to punish you for sully the school's reputation.'

'I don't go to Plums anymore,' Rachel told her with a heavy sigh.

'But, Rachel – you're their star pupil,' Alice replied.

'My father lost his job, so we had to move,' she said, recalling that Alice suffered the same fate with her father. 'I live here now.'

'I'm so sorry, Rachel,' said Alice glumly. 'Whereabouts do you live?'

'We live along the Forestry Glen at number eleven – it's right at –'

'*You lucky so and so,*' a boy's voice cut in.

'*Must be fun living in a treehouse?*' added the boy beside him.

Alice glowered at the gentlemen at table seven. 'Didn't your mother tell you it's rude to eavesdrop on people's conversation?' she asked them.

'She's worse than us,' said the boy with the short wavy black hair.

'And Dad's no better,' the other boy chipped in, brushing his long blond hair out of his eyes, showing a grin that matched his accomplice.

As they each drew up a chair, their grins grew even wider. 'Well, Alice – aren't you going to introduce us?' asked the black-haired boy.

'Well, if you insist,' she snorted. 'Rachel, I'd like you to meet William and Alfred Plodding. Alfred's the one with the long golden locks.'

'You've always looked like a girl,' William sniggered.

'Please to meet you,' said Rachel, shaking their hands.

'You might regret meeting us,' William chuckled.

'We're Eddie's favourite nephews,' Alfred imparted.

'You're his *only* nephews,' Alice harrumphed.

'HEY, YOU LOT – IT'S ABOUT TO START. YOU WON'T SEE ANYTHING FROM DOWN THERE,' shouted a girl's voice from the top of the stairs.

'WE'LL BE RIGHT UP, MARY,' William shouted back.

'WELL, YOU'VE GOT ABOUT TEN MINUTES,' she added.

'Since her sixteenth birthday, wouldn't you say her nagging's gotten a lot worse?' Alfred asked William sarcastically.

'It's a sister's job to nag her brothers to death,' William retorted.

'*What's about to start?*' asked Rachel, a little puzzled.

They all looked at her agog.

'You're kidding, right?' replied Alfred.

Rachel just shook her head and pursed her lips.

'So, you've never heard of the Inkcome Bore – *the world-famous Inkcome Bore?*' asked William in jest.

'No, I haven't,' Rachel replied, a tiny bit irked she hadn't.

'I guess she's been too busy studying Latin,' Alice smirked.

'OK, William – tell me about the Inkcome Bore,' Rachel huffed.

William beamed. 'The Bore is a magical wave sent by the Gods...' he began and paused for dramatic effect. 'It appears at the same time and on the same day every year. The ancient legend says the Bore washes away the evil spirits that lurk on the seabed – OUCH – that hurt!'

'You deserved that kick,' Alice told William. 'Stop telling porkies.'

'Well, at least half of it wasn't made up,' William snorted.

Alice faced Rachel and smiled. 'The Bore has been a regular visitor here since records began,' she told her straight, 'and it brings in the tourists who help to keep Captain Eddie's restaurant afloat.'

'You see, his restaurant has the best vantage point –' Alfred began.

'YOU'VE GOT ABOUT FIVE MINUTES, BOYS,' Mary shouted.

'C'mon – let's get up there before I go deaf,' William said.

'I'm not coming,' said Alice. 'I've all this muck to clean up – and when you've seen one Bore you've seen them all,' she added whimsically.

The Bore must be boring if I've never heard of it, thought Rachel, still miffed she hadn't heard of the unusual phenomenon. 'I'm the one that caused all this awful mess, Alice – I'll stay and help you clean up.'

* * *

Rachel giggled. 'It's a little bit big for me,' she told Alice, fitting into Joyce's plastic uniform, which squeaked annoyingly as she tried it on for size. 'So, what end of the table would you like me to start on first?'

'Well, as you're new to the job – how about giving the glass a jolly good clean,' she replied. 'I don't think it's ever had a proper scrub down.'

'Should I get my mum to give me a leg up?' Rachel chortled.

'Just start at the bottom of the dome,' Alice grinned, 'but be careful with the rubber seals as they're rotting away. We've had a couple of small floods, and Eddie needs to get them fixed, but he's such a penny pincher.'

Rachel dragged the bucket of soapy water across the slippery tiles. With some effort, she pulled her tight-fitting yellow rubber gloves up to her elbows, but she heard movement coming from the back of the room.

A stumbling shadowy figure sat down at the farthest table and rested their crutches up against a chair. Rachel thought the person just wanted some peace and quiet, well away from the stomping crowd above them.

'Henry's tablecloth is soaked in spaghetti sauce,' cringed Alice in disgust. 'Maybe I should just chuck it in the rubbish bin. What a ghastly tartan pattern. I think Henry's ancestors must have been colour blind.'

'I feel sorry for Judy having a father like him,' said Rachel bitterly, and got down on her knees and began rubbing the ingrained dirt, fresh pasta and sauce off the grotty mildew glass.

'You don't know the half of it,' said Alice heatedly.

'What d'you mean by that?'

'Remember when you made Prefect? Well, Judy went sick a day later.'

'Yes, I remember she had a nasty knock playing netball,' Rachel said. 'Those bruises on her neck and shoulders didn't heal for weeks – and she was off sick for well over a month.'

Alice's face turned sour. 'Judy never played netball that day,' she seethed. 'Miss Pritchard helped Henry cover up her injuries with a lie.'

'*He did that to her – didn't he?*' Rachel snarled.

'I found Judy crying behind the bike shed,' scowled Alice. 'She broke down – and told me everything about his drunken rages and cruelty.'

'And I just gave Henry his riding crop,' Rachel fumed and squeezed her sponge, thinking it was Henry's thick-skinned neck.

'You weren't to know,' Alice said.

Rachel plunged the sponge into the bucket, thinking it was Henry's head. Water splashed everywhere, and her throbbing scar turned to pain. Wrenching the gloves back out of the water, she glared down at the huge split in the rubber. Ripping the wet gloves off, she cast them aside and asked Alice, 'Where did you get this water from – it's salty –?'

'I – I DON'T BELIEVE IT – IT'S – IT'S TURNING – IT'S TURNING.'

'*What on earth is going on up there?*' Alice snapped.

'EVERYONE GET BACK – RUN FOR GOD'S SAKE – RUN!'

Terrified screams rang out, and heavy plumes of dust fell from the ceiling as stampeding footsteps thundered across it. The pool of water near Rachel's feet rippled, and to her astonishment, it turned tail and flowed back through the glass with an unnatural slurping sound.

The rumbling sound intensified. The bucket of salty water splashed about; it churned and spewed over the rim and rushed back through the glass, leaving the bucket high and dry and spinning across the floor.

Alice grabbed Rachel's hand and went to pull her away, but the dark shadowy mass fell upon the grubby glass-domed window. The Bore came crashing down against the glass, blotting out the remaining sunlight.

Turbulent water thrashed up against the glass dome.

The temperature dropped, and a sliver of yellow light squiggled in front of their eyes. By its side, another fragment of yellow light joined it. Squiggles of red, orange, green, cyan, blue and violet colours burst forth, their haunting glow made brighter by their adjacent twin.

Creepy wriggling tentacles blossomed into a mishmash of colours.

Thousands of fringe-like tentacles slithered across the glass with bloated bell-shaped bodies that pulsated like beating hearts.

Rachel recoiled at the sight of so many jellyfish and against her better judgement, she let go of Alice's sweaty hand and kept her fear at bay as she stepped towards the glass to face the countless fiery jumbled mass of jellyfish that spun around like crazy Catherine Wheels.

'Rachel – what are you doing?' Alice hissed. *'Keep back.'*

Rachel stepped no further and stared at the dog-eared shape that slid across the slimy glass until it came to rest in front of her. Held fast by the jellyfishes' icky sickly slime, Thomas Shire's photograph trembled against the glass as it came alive and whispered:

'Any room for an old salt and his wife, Mr Wyman?'

'It will be a tight squeeze, but I think I can fit you both in.'

'There's plenty of room at the back – just don't step on my boots.'

Torn and tattered, the soaking wet picture suddenly burst into colour.

The frizzy-haired clown took a step back; Rachel's jaw dropped as Larry, and Lydia Lido slipped into the picture and moved beside him. Her jaw dropped even further as her young grandmother, Nettie, skipped towards the dwarf and plonked herself right next to him, crossed her legs and gave the invisible photographer a smile and the thumbs up –

The room shuddered and then let out a terrible groan.

An explosive sucking sound followed and pulled the photograph, the jellyfish and the Bore away from the mud-splattered glass.

Bright sunlight relit the room. Rachel and Alice jumped out of their skins, as something crashed behind them. They whipped their heads around, and their eyes met Lorraine and an elderly woman.

With her arm gently wrapped around the old woman's bony shoulder, Lorraine asked her, 'Doctor Foster – Fidelia are you all right?'

Alice bent down and picked up the doctor's crutches.

Fidelia's wild wretched eyes stared into Rachel's face. *'I know you saw him,'* she told her. *'Don't you see – he's alive – my brother's alive...'*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Grumpy Pirate

Captain Eddie beamed with pride. A small crowd of customers praised him and took plenty of pictures. Right in front of him stood an excited couple with their twins who plucked up the courage and asked him for an autograph. Eddie grinned as he signed their well-thumbed tour guide.

‘That was amazing, Eddie – how on earth did you pull that off?’

‘Best magical trick I’ve ever seen in ages. Of course, it’s all done with mirrors, but the spinning jellyfish at the end was a stroke of genius.’

‘Book me table eleven for next year’s show – I want a ringside seat.’

* * *

Rachel, Alice, Alfred and William sat at table seven.

‘Well, at least we caught the end of it,’ William told Alfred.

‘Now, I wonder what made the Bore veer off course like that,’ Alfred postulated. ‘Something to do with the moon’s magnetic pull I suspect.’

‘I think the Gods looked down on Captain Eddie’s fine establishment and demanded his windows needed a jolly good wash,’ William smirked.

‘Do you want another kick, William?’ smiled Alice.

‘Go ahead, Alice – he’s a glutton for punishment,’ Alfred sniggered.

‘Those disgusting jellyfish gave me the creeps,’ said Alice, shivering at the thought of them. ‘Why on earth were they glowing like that?’

‘My guess is they were a bit peckish and wanted to eat us for lunch,’ Alfred replied. ‘You know they use their bioluminescent to lure their prey into their tentacles and use their deadly venom to dissolve the flesh.’

‘What a lovely thought,’ Alice remarked, scrunching up her face. ‘I’m going to have nightmares about them now.’

‘You’re very quiet, Rachel?’ William asked.

Rachel broke out of her thoughts. ‘Sorry, I was thinking about Doctor Foster,’ she replied. ‘She said her brother’s not dead.’

‘Of course, he’s not dead,’ Alice retorted. ‘He lives in an old peoples’ home down by the quay. My aunt knows him – and he’s very much alive.’

‘Looks like Fidelia’s gone mad listening to other peoples’ problems,’ Alfred said. ‘I think she needs to see a doctor –’

A boy in his white chef’s uniform attended their table. ‘The kitchen’s about to close, so can I get anyone a drink or maybe a sandwich?’ he asked with a wide grin, rubbing his jet-black hair under his itchy hairnet.

‘Hey, Jack – can we put the drinks on our tab?’ Alfred sniggered.

'No need, Alfred – Eddie's buying everyone a round of drinks,' he replied, looking quite shocked as his words left his mouth.

'Well, there's a turn up for the book,' said William dumbfounded. 'What's come over him? He's never bought a round of drinks before.'

'Eddie's wallet been rusted shut over all the years of misuse, and I'll wager he's managed to prise it open,' Alfred snorted. 'I'm betting he has a few doubloons and pieces of eight tucked away in there for a rainy day.'

Jack peered down at Rachel. 'Would the newcomer at table seven like a free drink,' he asked her warmly.

Rachel gazed into his grey eyes that glittered through the scratched lenses of his broken black glasses (its bridge fixed with thick red tape).

Alice nudged Rachel's arm, snapping her out of her overly long gaze.

'Um... what about a chocolate milkshake,' Rachel said at last.

'For your information, Jack, our young newcomer's name is Rachel,' beamed Alice. 'She's a very old friend of mine – we both went to Plums.'

'Please to meet you, Rachel,' said Jack brightly. 'Any friend of Alice is a friend of mind,' he added with deep sincerity and shook her hand. 'Now, what would the rest of you like?'

'I think we should go with the newcomer's choice,' offered Alfred, and everyone at table seven nodded their agreement.

'Chocolate milkshakes all around,' smiled Jack and bustled away.

* * *

Rachel slurped down the dregs of her milkshake with a well-bitten straw. She had joined in with the conversation, but her mind was elsewhere, and she couldn't stop thinking about Thomas Shire's odd photograph.

Her mother had taken Doctor Foster back to her room, while her father played round after round of darts and took advantage of Eddie's offer of free drinks and gulped down pint after pint of meady ale.

Over to her right, she glowered at William who held Alfred in a bizarre headlock as he explained the most efficient way of fighting off a grizzly bear. He only released his tight grip on his brother's neck when someone crept up behind him and gave him a sharp clip round the ear.

'T-thanks, S-Stew,' Alfred spluttered, coming up for air.

Stewart beamed back at Rachel's surprised face. 'So, Rachel – you've finally met these two reprobates?' he muttered, looking a bit flustered.

'Here – who are you calling reprobates,' William scoffed, sounding mildly offended. 'We learnt all our reprobating from you, Stew.'

Stewart gave William an exasperated sideways glance and quickly pulled up a chair. He eyed every one of them with a worried look. 'I have a pot of good news – but I have buckets of bad news,' he told them.

'We'll take the good news first, Stew,' said Alice.

'The teachers at Gravelings are going on strike,' he spouted.

William gave Alfred a high five. 'I knew they wouldn't want to teach the likes of us anymore. The teachers can't handle the rough with the smooth,' he chortled with a smile that spoke of a job well done.

Alice shook her head. 'Your science teacher Mr Rawlings is probably breathing a sigh of relief after what happened last week,' she told them.

'I know I'm going to regret asking this,' Rachel frowned, 'but what happened last week?'

'Mr Rawlings had just finished his talk on fire safety in the laboratory when William burped near a Bunsen burner,' sighed Alice. 'Mr Rawlings' eyebrows got singed, but his toupee bore the brunt of the flames.'

'Nine hot dogs for lunch – possibly a school record,' Alfred guffawed.

'And what about the bad news, Stew?' Rachel asked.

Stewart's face looked grave, and even William and Alfred stopped laughing about Mr Rawlings' burnt hairpiece and remained tight-lipped.

'Gribble's scrapyard is shut for the foreseeable future – so no more spare parts for our candyfloss machine,' said Stewart, giving Rachel an uncomfortable look, 'and no spare parts your father's ice-cream van.'

'But, Stew, my dad needs the van else he's out of a job,' she aired.

'And Bumbles need to keep their customers,' he added gloomily.

'But why has it shut?' Alfred demanded.

'There's been another death in the family,' said Stewart glumly. 'The youngest Mr Gribble has unfortunately popped his proverbial clogs.'

'Didn't *his* father die only a few days ago?' Alice inquired.

'Yes, and that's why the boys in blue are buzzing around the Gribble's scrapyard like busy bees in spring,' Stewart bemoaned.

'I've heard the police are investigating foul play,' Alfred chipped in.

'And they've taped off the entire scrapyard,' Stewart added.

'That must have cost a small fortune,' William snorted.

'The police are still questioning the Gribble's butler,' said Stewart, 'but I'm sure he didn't do it – so that just leaves the Gribble's only child.'

'Don't be daft, Stew,' Alfred scoffed, shaking his mane of hair. 'You know Sophronia's been locked up in that institution for like an ice age.'

'I assume you mean Bellingtons,' added Alice guardedly. 'Probably the most exclusive boarding school this side of the border.'

'Bellingtons is built like a fortress,' William told them.

'Built more like a prison if you ask me,' Stewart said.

'I've heard a nasty rumour about that place,' said Alice, sounding mysterious. 'Petula Wilding use to go to Bellingtons – well, she did up until about a month ago,' she added, sounding even more mysterious.

'Well, go on,' pressed Rachel, hanging on her every word.

'Apparently, Petula's sweet tooth got the better of her, and she stole Sophronia's black liquorice wheels,' replied Alice sinisterly. 'Petula was hospitalised the very next day, as most of her teeth had either decayed or fallen out and even her lips had turned deathly black.'

'Yuk – *that's gross*,' Rachel grimaced, wishing she hadn't asked about the nasty rumour in the first place.

'Mrs Rose Dandelion, Bellingtons' headmistress, found out the truth of the matter and punished Sophronia severely for smuggling in sweets into the school,' Alice told them reservedly. 'I heard she only got out of solidarity confinement because one of the school governors intervened.'

'So, it's obvious she's not a suspect,' Alfred advocated.

'Gladys told me they've put a round-the-clock policeman on guard outside the main gate,' Stewart informed them. 'With a murderer on the loose, Detective Sergeant Ian Inchman isn't taking any chances what with his new promotion and all.'

Rachel sighed. 'Well, Stewart, we don't really have much choice – now do we?' she said with a heavy heart. 'We've got to get into the scrapyard without getting arrested,' she added apprehensively.

'To be honest, I'm more worried about the getting murdered bit,' added Stewart light-heartedly but nobody laughed.

'If your parents find out what you're planning – they'll probably murder you instead,' Alice told Rachel reprovably.

Rachel gave Alice a look of *just you dare tell them*.

Stewart clapped his hands together in glee. 'Well, I'm definitely in,' he smirked gleefully. 'So, d'you boys want to go scrumping for scrap?'

Alfred and William looked at one another and grinned joyously.

'Just try and stop us, Stew,' William chuckled.

'Scrumping's in our blood,' Alfred added.

'As Head Girl, I can't – I won't let you lot go,' snapped Alice. 'It's my responsibility to keep Gravelings' pupils on the right side of the law.'

'I s'ppose you're going to split on us?' Stewart snarled, flashing Alice a scathing look. 'And here's me thinking you were still one of us?'

Alice ignored Stewart's cutting remark, but it still hurt. 'Anyway, how are you going to get across the estuary? Do you even have a boat – or a car that floats? Even at low tide, the causeway's difficult to navigate.'

It's downright dangerous and foolhardy to even attempt a crossing,' she protested, out of breath and out of excuses why they shouldn't go.

'*She's got a point,*' Alfred piped up.

William kicked him.

'And how are you going to get by the police on guard without being spotted, eh?' added Alice smugly. 'Admit it – you don't have a plan –?'

A hairless tattooed arm slammed a poster down on the table. Riddled with dart pinholes, the poster advertised *Pirates' Night down at the Grumpy Sailor*. 'I think this should give us a diversion,' Gladys told Alice bluntly. 'Bob Jones wants me to kidnap his dog Finkle, and I have a plan for getting into the scrapyard – so who wants to come along for the ride?'

* * *

'Just hold still for a little bit longer... there, all done, Dad,' said Rachel and carefully placed the green paint pot down on the kitchen table, stood back and admired her creative handiwork. 'Right, just try and sit still for ten minutes – the quick-drying paint should be cured by then.'

'Can I at least breathe?' asked Paul grumpily. 'I'm parched – and I could do with a strong cup of tea to wet my whistle.'

'Now, if you really want to get into character, you should have a grog of rum,' Lorraine told Paul frivolously. 'The scar down your father's cheek is a nice touch, Rachel. I always knew you had an artistic streak.'

'Thanks, Mum,' she grinned and stepped towards the sink to fill the kettle with water. 'D'you think Dad's parrot is ready for *Pirates' Night*?'

The clock on the kitchen wall chimed five times. On the dining room wall, the Cooks' ageing cuckoo clock hadn't made an appearance, and the freshly painted songbird on Paul's shoulder hadn't made a sound, either.

'The bird still looks a bit dishevelled – but it will have to do,' Lorraine muttered. 'Cheer up, Paul – you look like you're going to a funeral.'

'I'm going to miss the championship darts match at Captain Eddies,' he said tetchily. 'And why all the rush? The festivities don't start for at least another couple of hours.'

'Gladys phoned and said there's been an accident along the High Street,' sighed Lorraine exasperatedly. 'Anyway, you can play darts with the locals in the Grumpy Sailor's saloon bar.'

'I bet they're not dressed up like some fanciful pantomime dame,' griped Paul bitterly. 'And do I have to wear this long curly wig – *it itches*?'

The kettle boiled. Rachel dropped a teabag into her father's favourite mug, and her head disappeared into the cupboard.

'We're going there for Rachel's sake,' Lorraine whispered. 'All her friends are going to the Grumpy Sailor for Pirates' Night – so it will look odd if she doesn't go as well, and you never know, you might actually enjoy yourself.'

'Is George going along?'

'You know he isn't – he's been grounded.'

'Here you go, Dad,' said Rachel and handed her father a piping hot cup of tea. 'Two sugars – oh, I couldn't find any grog in the cupboard.'

Lorraine chuckled and gave Rachel a sly grin, but she stared over her shoulder at the kitchen clock, whose ticking seemed more urgent. 'Well, shiver me timbers, I'd better get shipshape and Bristol fashion for tonight's entertainment,' she blustered. 'Right, I think I've made just enough cardboard cutlasses for a flotilla of budding young pirates.'

Rachel looked confused and asked her, 'Cutlasses – what cutlasses?'

'Oh, didn't I tell you,' Lorraine snorted, acting all innocent. 'Gladys has kindly offered to ferry the Forestry Glen's children to the Grumpy Sailor tonight. Your father and I are helping her out, but she might be a little bit late – something about a surprise for the kiddiewinks.'

* * *

The sun began to set behind the treehouses, and the clouds rolled inland.

Lorraine rechecked her watch for the fourth time and started tapping her foot. 'Where's Gladys got to? We're going to be late for the opening ceremony,' she moaned, more to herself than anyone else in earshot.

Rachel peered down the street. Mrs Muckle corralled her brood of children into the cul-de-sac. The Shuttlecock's small terrier, Terrence, had escaped from his garden and joined in at the end of the conga line.

At the head of the long snaking line, the portly one-eyed pirate held his cardboard cutlass high. He gave Rachel and Lorraine a merry wave and sang another sea shanty as the pirate children followed his lead.

'Give him a uniform, and it goes to his head,' Lorraine smirked.

'Well, you did want Dad to get into character,' Rachel reminded her, 'and at least he's not grumpy anymore –'

BOOOOOOOOOOOM!

A billowing silhouette blotted out the sinking sun and its glorious orange hues. The sonic boom sounded out again. Rolling white clouds of smoke shot out of the silhouette that had trundled into the cul-de-sac.

The children went wild, and their parents roared even louder than their offspring. Tall timber masts rose above them with swelling white sails and a tatty Jolly Roger that hung on for dear life in the brisk wind. The hulking wooden hull of a pirate ship halted outside number eleven.

‘AHOY DOWN THERE – ARE YOU LOT READY TO BOARD?’

The children waved their cutlasses up at the ship’s captain and screamed together, ‘Yessssssssss!’ They screamed even louder as Gladys grabbed a rope and swung down to the pavement like a seasoned pirate.

‘C’mon, little’uns – we don’t want to be late for our pirate supper,’ Gladys chuckled with her real cutlass raised high.

Clad in full pirate regalia, Rachel stared at Gladys and her surprise for the kiddiewinks that completely bowled her over.

By all accounts, she had dropped a half-scale pirate ship down on her tram. The tram’s tyres were buckling under the sheer weight of the ship.

Paul, Lorraine and Gladys wasted no time, guided the last stragglers along the gangplank and hustled them into the bowels of the ship.

Up on deck, Alfred and William’s cutlasses clashed as they fought to the death. Stewart held onto the ship’s wheel with a jabbering parrot on his left shoulder. The parrot flapped its wings and flew away as she hollered, ‘AHOY THERE, SHIPMATES – ANY ROOM FOR ANOTHER PIRATE?’

Stewart spotted her and yelled, ‘*There’s plenty of room up here, Rachel – hold on – I’ll send the bucket seat down...*’

Rachel spun around in the wind, and she fell out of the bucket seat and onto the wooden deck with little dignity. Still hot and sweaty from their pirate playacting, William and Alfred came over and joined them.

‘So, Rachel, what do you think of Gladys’ pirate ship?’ Stewart asked, brushing the bird poop and green feathers off his shoulder.

‘It wouldn’t look out of place on the High Seas,’ she scoffed.

‘If you think about it, who’s going to take any notice of a pirate ship on Pirates’ Night,’ William enthused, ‘and Gladys’ plan in getting into Gribble’s scrapyard is virtually foolproof.’

‘Let’s hope you’re right, William,’ said Rachel. ‘I’m counting on the weather forecast being correct for a change.’

‘Why’s that?’ Alfred asked.

‘It’s a full moon, so we need to keep these clouds for cover,’ Rachel replied, but her eyes scouted the deck, not the sky. ‘Um – where’s Alice?’

Stewart face darkened. ‘She stormed off in a temper,’ he said in a brittle tone. ‘She’s taking her duties of Head Girl way too seriously.’

* * *

With the booming canons firing their last charges, the pirate ship slowly limped over the speed bumps. Harold Higgins stood to attention and gave the ship a sharp salute as he held Wilberforce by his side. However, his boisterous bulldog went down on all fours and whimpered.

Rachel held onto the pirate ship's wheel for support. As they sailed past The Nutty Pine treehouse, she gazed up at the only lit porthole window and wondered why George's landladies had grounded him.

* * *

'Gladys is cutting it a bit fine,' Stewart said. 'It's almost seven o'clock.'

'If she sings another sea shanty,' Alfred muttered, 'I'm going to keelhaul her myself and give her the cat o' nine tails for good measure.'

'I wish I'd taken some seasickness tablets,' said Rachel queasily, looking decidedly green about the gills.

Gladys' whooped. 'STANDBY TO WEIGH ANCHOR,' she bellowed.

The bright buzzing bunting on the Grumpy Sailor public house lit up the quayside. The ship listed lazily to port and then righted itself before landing with its bow in the beer garden and its stern in the children's paddling pool because the becalmed parking lot hadn't any space left.

The gangplank bounced as hordes of excited children disembarked.

Lorraine and Paul chased after the children as they sped along the pavement and through the pub's swinging doors.

Everyone else gathered around Gladys' pirate ship.

'My parents are going to be busy for the next couple of hours,' Rachel announced, 'so we better get a move on before the weather turns –'

A flashing white came their way. The sound of clicking wheels came with a blue figure who struggled to stay upright. The policeman's brakes squealed annoyingly as he jammed them on. He came to a jolting stop right beside Gladys' immaculate black buckled boots.

William and Alfred slowly backed away.

'Evening,' said the policeman.

'Evening,' the pirates chorused.

'Excuse me – but which one of you is the driver of this... um, ship?'

'That would be me,' replied Gladys. 'Is there a problem?'

'Well, I can't see your rear number plate,' he said, leaning over his handlebars, checking to see if he could read the ship's front number plate amongst the cluster of crustaceans. 'Now, it's just a warning this time.'

'Yes, Officer – it won't happen again,' Gladys told him.

'The next time I see *The Scarlet Lady* on the road – I want to see her rear number plate,' the policeman said and mounted his bicycle. 'You all have a pleasant evening,' he added and rode off into the night.

The Scarlet Lady dogged her every move, Rachel thought.

'That was too close for comfort,' Alfred said to William. 'I thought our goose was cooked. I'm pretty sure he didn't have a good look at us.'

'Now, what have you two been up to?' Rachel asked, but she quickly had second thoughts as Alfred and William grinned back at her with mischievous eyes. 'No, forget I even asked – I really don't want to know.'

The ship's wind vane veered.

'We're in luck,' beamed Gladys. 'We'll have the wind at our backs.'

* * *

The solitary blue figure looked up at the dispersing clouds and emerging moon as he waited patiently for the tide to turn. The policeman made his way along the slippery waterlogged causeway and struggled to push his bicycle up through the sand dunes that clogged up his spokes. He thought he had lost his way, but he smiled as he had spotted a rather grubby sign:

**GRIBBLE'S SCRAPYARD
VISITORS BY APPOINTMENT ONLY**

**THIS IS PRIVATE PROPERTY. TRESPASSERS WILL BE
PROSECUTED TO THE FULLEST EXTENT OF THE LAW AND
THEN SOME**

YOU LOT HAVE BEEN WARNED

He leant his bicycle against the chain fencing and unbuckled his pannier. He began unwrapping layer upon layer of plastic wrapping, but as he freed his entombed tuna and cucumber sandwiches, he heard a rustling noise and grabbed his truncheon – almost dropping the weapon in panic.

'HALT – WHO GOES THERE?' he shouted fearfully.

The floodlights fizzled. A man came out of them and removed his flat cap, ruffled his thick hair and said, 'At ease, PC Taylor – at ease.'

The tall man folded his flat cap in half and placed it in his heavy overcoat pocket. PC Taylor quickly lowered his truncheon and asked in amazement, 'DS Inchman – what the devil are you doing here, sir?'

'I relieved PC Jenkins a few minutes ago,' he replied. 'I just wanted to come back here and check up on a few things.'

'Isn't it your day off, sir?' PC Taylor quizzed him.

'Murder doesn't take time off,' retorted DS Inchman with a weighty smirk. 'There's something definitely odd about this place. I can't put my finger on it, but something smells decidedly fishy about this case.'

PC Taylor eyed his sandwiches and decided he needed some hot tea instead. 'Police Commissioner McDonald told us it's an open and shut case,' he informed him. 'Would you like a cuppa, sir?'

DS Inchman nodded that he would.

PC Taylor pulled a flask and two clay mugs out of his pannier.

'McDonald retires in a few months,' DS Inchman said with a hollow smile. 'Fergus wants to bathe in other peoples' accomplishments. He's the golden boy of the force,' he added with a scowl. 'He's risen through the ranks on the backs of hardworking men and woman. Thirty years in the force, and he's never lifted a finger or even solved a single crime.'

'Excuse me for speaking aloud, sir,' said PC Taylor hesitantly, 'but I take it you've never liked the commissioner?'

DS Inchman chuckled. 'I'm I that obvious?' he asked, not expecting an answer. 'Old money and heritage buy a lot these days.'

'Um – here's your cuppa, sir,' said PC Taylor. 'Sorry about the mug – Hilary made it at art school,' he added apologetically.

DS Inchman supped thoughtfully on his milky tea and made a snap decision. 'I think I'll have just one more look around the yard,' he said ruefully. 'I'm going in by the tradesman's entrance, but I think I'll have just enough time to look around before the tide returns.'

'Do you want to borrow my truncheon, sir?' PC Taylor asked. 'You know – just in case the murderer comes back and takes you by surprise.'

'No, Simon,' said DS Inchman gratefully. 'You keep it. I'll be fine with just my wits,' he added with a broad grin and fumbled for his flat cap.

'Goodnight, Ian,' Simon said.

'Give my regards to Hilary,' Ian replied, put his flat cap on his head and vanished back into the flickering shadows with steely-eyed resolve.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A Death in the Family

William stared at Gladys in awe at her ridiculously dangerous, foolhardy suggestion in getting into Gribble's scrapyard. 'You're raving bonkers,' he told her, 'but I think it's a brilliant plan – and it just might work.'

'As plans go – it's crazy with a cherry on top,' Alfred added.

'Crazy or bonkers, it's the only plan we have,' said Stewart.

'You're all barking,' Rachel told them despairingly.

'Sorry, Rachel, but you're outnumbered – and we're running out of time,' declared Gladys. 'Your parents will think you've been shanghaied unless we put our skates on. The tide won't wait for us or anyone else.'

'I wish Alice were here to talk you out of this madness, Gladys,' said Rachel inconsolably. 'Well, if I can't stop you, I might as well help.'

Gladys patted Rachel's arm affectionately. 'All I need is a few of those lifejackets and my crash helmet,' she said soothingly.

From neck to toe, Rachel covered Gladys in yellow lifejackets and jammed the crash helmet onto her head. 'See you on the other side, Gladys – and hopefully all in one piece,' she said apprehensively and watched William, Alfred and Stewart as they lowered her into the wide barrel of a stocky cannon that glimmered from the light of the moon.

'What about the cannon's trajectory, Gladys?' Stewart asked. 'What do we aim at?' he added, pressing home the urgency of his question.

Gladys gave Stewart's question a moment's thought. 'Well, based on the current weather conditions and my weight – you better aim for that pink rocking horse over there on the ridge. I know for a fact, there's a whole load of loft insulation just below it that should break my fall.'

'Well, look on the bright side, at least you won't freeze to death when you land,' Alfred snorted, shooting William a wily smile.

Rachel gave Alfred a cutting stare. 'Let me do it, Stewart,' she told him. 'I might as well be a part of this insanity.'

William and Alfred moved the cannon into position.

Stewart handed Rachel the rope fuse. 'Now, just one sharp tug and it should go off,' he said. 'Stand well back and to the side of the cannon.'

Rachel took a deep breath. 'Ready, Gladys...? 3... 2... 1...' she said and pulled the rope – but she let her hand slip right through. Her eyesight did a double-take, but there wasn't any mistake: the front gates to Gribble's scrapyard were wide open.

* * *

'Well, I can't see him,' Stewart said. 'Look, his bicycle's by the fence.'

'His helmet and truncheon are here, too,' William added.

'The wind must have kicked up a right old sandstorm,' said Alfred.

'The bicycle wheels are stuck fast in the sand dunes.'

Rachel felt the icy chill in the air and hugged herself.

'Hmmm... now, that's most peculiar,' Gladys mumbled and ambled over towards the gate. 'The padlock is still locked, however...'

They all gathered around.

'I see what you mean,' said Stewart mystified.

'The chain's been sandblasted to smithereens,' Alfred inferred.

'I don't like it – I don't like it at all,' said Rachel ominously. 'I can feel it in my bones. I just know something's off about this place. It's like someone's just walked over my grave and back again.'

'It's a golden opportunity – that what it is,' spouted Gladys. 'C'mon – let's get going. OK, we better split up – now, Stewart, you take Alfred and William and get those spare parts. Rachel and I will go and find Finkle. Whoever gets back to the ship first sounds the foghorn three times. We haven't got much time – and I don't want to get stuck here.'

Stewart looked over his shoulder. 'We've got less than an hour before the tide turns,' he told William and Alfred fixedly. 'Torches at the ready, boys – let's go scrumping...'

* * *

'So, where do we start looking for Finkle?' Rachel asked Gladys.

'There's a small wood cabin up on the ridge over there,' she replied, pointing between a pile of twisted metal junk and a pile of broken coffins. 'I guess Gribble – God rest his miserable soul – has Finkle guarding the safe up in there. The old toerag never trusted anyone, so he's probably taken the lock's combination to the grave.'

Rachel and Gladys struggled over so many sand drifts they had lost count. The floodlights were more annoying than useful in illuminating their way through the junkyard. The clouds petered out, leaving the stark moonlight to guide them to the shadowy outline of Gribble's log cabin.

* * *

DS Ian Inchman let out a frustrated sigh. His arduous walk through the sand dunes had been a complete and utter waste of time: his crime scene lay beneath a mountain of sand, and any evidence he might have missed the first time would be nigh on impossible to investigate now.

The pink rocking horse above him rocked silently back and forth. Ian pulled his collar up as the persistent breeze sent a chill down his spine.

The floodlights crackled, fizzed and then died.

Ian sighed again, reached into his coat pocket and switched on his torch. With nothing left to keep him at the crime scene, he turned his head towards the tradesmen's entrance, but suddenly his ears perked up.

He spun around and used the torch's beam to scour for the source of the strange sound that kept him alert and riveted to the spot.

A sudden swift gust of wind cut across the yard. The rocking horse hadn't rocked but made a troubling creaking noise; however, the rusted hulks of discarded metal shivered, as if they too felt the chill in the air.

Right at that moment, his torch decided to give up the ghost. With irritation throbbing through his veins, he smacked his torch, hoping that brute force would bring it back to life, but it just sprang apart. He knelt down and picked up the batteries, but something caught his eye: the moonlight illuminated something right by his right shoe.

With blind luck on his side, he retrieved a plastic bag and tweezers from his top pocket. He popped the black object into a bag and grinned at his newly discovered evidence.

As he quickly placed the bag and tweezers back into his top pocket, the strange sound resurfaced in the sand beneath his sinking knees. A blackened pair of teeth and macabre lips pushed through the oily sand.

Taken by surprise, Ian hadn't time to feel fear as a pair of gargantuan sandy hands grabbed his shoulders and screamed, *'Thou shall not steal!'*

* * *

'Where's it coming from?' Rachel screeched.

'IT CAME FROM OVER THERE,' Gladys bellowed over her shoulder, turning and then bolting through a narrow corridor of twisted metal.

Another terrifying scream cut through the scrapyard.

Spurred on by an instinct she knew all too well, Rachel raced after Gladys and soon caught up, but she reeled in horror and fell to one side, dragging Gladys down with her as a torrential tornado of sand and scrap threatened to whisk them away into the violent spinning vortex.

Riding on the ferocious gale-force wind, three blasts from a foghorn barely reached their ears as the roaring noise intensified.

Above them, the rocking horse's hooves splintered with a splitting sound. Seconds later, it broke away from its moorings and cartwheeled into the vortex of fiery coloured sparks as metal smashed against metal.

Rising up from the maelstrom, a soaring sand devil came into being. Reaching high above the vortex, its sandy hand held a limp body aloft.

The sand devil's cruel face licked its black lips in anticipation – but it let out a searing roar of pain and clutched at its gangly throat.

Another spinning disc brought about another agonising cry from the sand devil as it writhed in agony, but as its pain languished, its rage rose up again as it stared down at the lone figure standing on the roof of a dilapidated old school bus, half-submerged in sand and marram grass.

Rachel's heart fluttered as George snatched another tyre hub from a stack, spun around and threw the improvised metal discus at the sand devil. She wasted no time and flung herself across a couple of car bonnets and over a stack of bald tyres, throwing her arms high to get his attention and bellowed, 'GEORGE – OVER HERE!'

With grim resolve and a hasty nod, he kicked a stack of hubs down to her and shouted, 'AIM FOR THE THROAT – IT'S ITS WEAK SPOT.'

Rachel snatched up a couple of hubs and spun the first one, but it wobbled and veered into the vortex; however, her second spin found its mark, and the sand devil staggered but still didn't fall.

She knew they were too far away, so she grabbed two more hubs and ran full pelt towards the sand devil – and right into harm's way.

The sand devil roared again and swiped a hand at her, but it missed by a long shot, almost losing its balance in its snarling rage.

Rachel took a chance and darted behind a half-sunken tow truck.

Another raging roar and a swipe, almost tipped the truck over that would have crushed her, but she steadied her nerves and bided her time.

Almost dead ahead of her, three flashing lights came out of the night. Distracted, the sand devil focused its wrath against the blinding beams.

Rachel gripped the hubs and gritted her teeth. The time was now, and she ran straight into the line of fire and leapt into the air.

Twisting her torso, her hub hummed as it sped at lightning speed.

The sand devil's guttural scream added to the chill in the air as it clutched at its severed throat and stumbled, almost collapsing to the ground with the limp, unmoving body that fell through its fingers.

Chunks of metal kept the sand devil at bay. Like archers from olden times, Alfred, William and Stewart raised their catapults and fired again.

With the sand devil severely wounded and distracted by the barrage, George sped by her with another hub. Rachel felt its rage rise up, and she bellowed out a stark warning as she shot after him, but she wasn't fast enough, and it took him down with a single stunning blow to the head.

Rachel's lungs screamed out George's name, and she felt no other emotion but revenge. With her last remaining hub, she dealt the killing blow to its neck. At the point of exhaustion, she watched the sand devil fall to its knees as it writhed in agony. The wind wailed against the sudden squall that tore the sand devil to shreds, and she covered her head with her arm as mountainous plumes of sand plummeted to the ground.

In the unnerving aftermath that remained, Rachel and Gladys rushed over towards George, pulled him off the ground and set him down against a stack of discarded black wooden coffins.

Gladys felt for his pulse and shrieked, '*George, are you all right?*'

George spluttered and coughed up a lung. 'Of course, I'm all right,' he smiled, grinning back at her, but he gave Rachel a look of gratitude.

'You need an icepack,' said Gladys. 'Your face is swelling up a bit.'

'At least I know how it feels to be swatted like a fly,' George scoffed.

'What was that – that thing?' asked Rachel heatedly.

'Something malevolent that shouldn't even exist,' Gladys hissed.

'I knew something was off about this place,' Rachel added.

A stone's throw away, Stewart bellowed, 'HEY – COME OVER HERE – I THINK HE'S STILL ALIVE.'

Rachel, George and Gladys joined Stewart, Alfred and William by the heavy pile of loft insulation. The man in the heavy overcoat groaned. Gladys waded into the insulation and gently rolled him over.

William and Alfred slowly backed away.

'Where are you two going?' Rachel demanded.

'That's Detective Sergeant Inchman,' William replied. 'Ian's our next-door neighbour,' he added glumly.

Ian's confused face looked up and asked, '*I'm I dead?*'

'I'm afraid you're very much alive, Ian,' Gladys retorted and helped him to his feet. 'It was a stroke of luck you landed on this insulation.'

'Now, did I or did I not imagine that sand thingy?' he asked them tentatively, not wanting to sound as crazy as he felt.

'You mean the psycho sand devil?' Stewart replied. 'Yep, we all saw it – you're not going crazy, Ian.'

'Why did it attack you?' Rachel asked.

Ian raised a smile and pulled out a plastic bag from his top pocket. 'It didn't like me stealing this,' he said plainly and grinned. 'It's all the evidence I have in breaking the case.'

'Well, it's pretty obvious who murdered the Gribbles,' said Stewart, 'but who would believe it in a court of law.'

Ian put the half-chewed liquorice wheel back into his top pocket. 'I'd like to keep my job, so I'm asking you to keep mum about all this.'

'In other words – we were never here,' said William.

'Isn't that our motto?' Alfred sniggered.

'Did you see a policeman at the gate?' Ian asked. 'PC Taylor must have seen or heard that sand devil,' he added anxiously.

As they looked blankly at one another, a fluffy white dog – with a floppy plastic toy in its jaws – bounded up to Ian with a wagging tail.

'Finkle,' Gladys squeaked. '*No wonder we couldn't find you!*'

Ian bent down and ruffled the dog's head. 'He's been helping me with my investigations – haven't you, boy,' he said in a silly voice.

Gladys turned to Stewart. 'Did you get the spare parts?' she asked and then stared at her wristwatch. '*We need to get going.*'

'We got everything we came for – and a little bit more,' he replied mischievously, flashing Alfred and William a sideways smile.

William gazed at George. 'Who's your boyfriend, Rachel?' he asked.

'George *isn't* my boyfriend, William,' she huffed, but she blushed.

'What you did out there, George – that was impressive with a capital I,' Alfred said. 'It's not every day you take down a monstrous sand devil.'

'Rachel's the one that killed it,' George imparted.

Stewart gave George and Rachel a rueful smile. 'I'm going to have to agree with you, Alfred – you two make a great team.'

* * *

'SHE'S TAKING IN WATER,' Gladys shouted from the mizzenmast. 'I'VE STARTED THE PUMPS, BUT THEY'RE OVERHEATING, AND THEY LOOK LIKE THEY'RE ABOUT TO PEG OUT – WE NEED TO LEAVE NOW!'

'C'mon, Ian – we don't want to get stranded on the island,' Rachel pressed him. 'And that goes for you too, Finkle – stop digging holes.'

'*Dammit, Simon – where on earth are you?*' muttered Ian impatiently.

Rachel called Finkle again, but it ignored her and carried on digging. With its lead in her hand, she rushed over towards the disobedient dog, but she suddenly stopped dead in her tracks.

The dog's chilling discovery hit home, and she let out a scream.

Ian rushed over. Down amongst the deepest dune, a policeman's hat and truncheon lay half-buried in the sand, and right beside them, lay a blue-uniformed man, whose unblinking eyes stared up at the cloudless sky and the moon that hung there.

Ian let out a muffled cry and fell to his knees.

Gladys rushed up to them with Finkle by her side. 'Are you two tone-deaf – we have to leave –' she began, but she let out a gasp as her eyes fell upon the dead policeman's tormented face. '*He's been buried alive.*'

Ian reached over the body and closed the man's eyes. He stood up, took his overcoat off and draped it gently over the lifeless body. 'He was a good man,' he said reverently, 'but he didn't deserve to die and not like this,' he added embittered, holding back his overwhelming grief.

'Did you know him well?' Rachel asked, masking the uneasiness that permeated through her chilled bones.

Ian faced her and composed himself as best he could. 'I was the best man at his wedding,' he replied proudly. 'Simon was my brother.'

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Funeral for a Friend

Flashing blue lights lit up the Grumpy Sailor. Several police cars and an ambulance screamed to a halt right beside the beer garden. Pirates, both young and old, pushed their way through the swinging doors, craning their necks, wondering what all the commotion was about.

DS Ian Inchman talked agitatedly to a gruff looking old codger, whose handlebar moustache looked as dated as the man himself. With his face brimming over with anguish, Ian threw his hands up into the air and stormed off into the dead of night.

* * *

Rachel stared up at the polka-dotted ceiling. Back in her bedroom, she thought about the day that had unsettled her. The stack of books on her bedside table lay unread since last night. With the sounds of sirens and screaming pirates still ringing in her ears, she couldn't get to sleep no matter how hard she tried counting sheep.

As soon as she closed her eyes, she saw PC Simon Taylor's dead stare. Both she and George had faced down the sand devil, but that was little consolation to PC Taylor's wife and her fatherless children. Their hollow victory against something she didn't understand seemed unreal.

Gladys' ship had barely made it back across the estuary. It was all hands on deck as they mucked in and bailed out the bowels of the ship. Exhausted in both body and soul, they had said little as the ship's sails fell limp as the doldrums dropped by. *The Scarlet Lady* waddled along the road at a snail's pace before mooring in the Grumpy Sailor's carpark.

As Gladys' shipmates had thinned out, they gave her either a warm hug or a firm handshake. There wasn't any mistaking her for the ship's captain. George had easily explained his arrival at the scrapyard. He wasn't going to tidy up his bedroom when a pirate ship had sailed past his window with all cannons firing. Without the slightest fear of heights, he had shimmied down the drainpipe and snuck aboard Gladys' ship. His pirate's outfit, false black beard and real parrot had fooled everyone.

Stewart had told Rachel he would drop by first thing tomorrow to fix the ice-cream van and help with a few odd jobs around the house. With the rattling of the porthole window and another bout of blustery wind coming in from the north, the unseasonal weather lulled her into sleep.

* * *

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Rachel's head throbbed. The banging noise hadn't let up. Welded shut by her night's uninterrupted slumber, she slowly prised them open. The banging sounds were coming from the attic. She rolled her head to one side and glanced at her alarm clock. *The hands must be wrong*, she thought. *Her father wouldn't be up this early* –

The hatch above her suddenly slid open. A boy's head poked through it and gave her a happy grin. 'Hiya, Rachel – I've fixed your leak.'

Rachel screamed and snatched her bed covers right up to her neck, glaring back at the blond-headed boy. 'Stew – *didn't your mother ever tell you to knock before you enter a girl's room?*' she squealed, still in shock that her friend had woken her up before eight o' clock and in her pyjamas.

'Sorry, Rachel – I thought you would be up by now,' he grinned.

'Well, obviously not,' she retorted. 'Now, if a girl can have a little privacy around here – I'll shower, get dressed and meet you downstairs for some breakfast.'

Stewart's face lit up. 'You said the magic word,' he chuckled and slammed the hatch shut.

* * *

The Cooks' doorbell rang.

'*I'll get the door*,' Rachel yelled and raced down the spiral staircase.

The front door glided open without a single judder. Rachel stared at the door and then at her postman, Toby, who had a green parrot on his shoulder. 'Pirates' Night was last night, Toby,' she chuckled.

Toby didn't laugh or raise a titter. 'Here's your mail, Rachel,' he said stiffly, his normal jolly face devoid of pleasantries.

The parrot squawked, '*Who's a pretty boy then?*' and flew over her head into the house and down the hallway. 'MUM – A PARROT'S JUST FLOWN INTO THE HOUSE,' she shouted over her shoulder.

'*I know – we were expecting him*,' Lorraine yelled back.

'Well, I must be on my way,' said Toby all melancholy and morose, tipping his imaginary hat at her as he bade her farewell.

'Goodbye, Toby,' Rachel said and shut the door with ease; however, she hadn't the heart to tell him the parrot had messed down his jacket.

In the kitchen, Lorraine sang along to the radio as she cracked egg after egg into a glass bowl and began beating them with a wooden spoon.

Half expecting to see her father at the table, Rachel looked surprised as only George and Stewart greeted her with broad smiles.

'Good morning, gentlemen and welcome to Cooks' café,' she said frivolously. 'We're open from seven to four on weekdays – now, would you like a complimentary buttered crumpet to start the day?'

Lorraine placed a thick pile of buttered crumpets on the table. 'Here you go, boys – eat them before they get cold. I'll just check up on the bacon – oh, Rachel, have you decided on breakfast?' she added wearily.

'I'll have what these gentlemen are having, Mum.'

'And I'll have a pint of bitter, my good man – and have one yourself,' squawked the parrot that hung upside down from the light fitting.

Rachel pulled up a chair and wondered why nobody took any notice of the chattering parrot. The Cooks' cuckoo clock whirled on the wall.

The parrot flew down and landed on the shuttered pine house, where a dishevelled green songbird slowly hobbled out, blew a feeble raspberry and hobbled back into its home just as slowly.

The parrot gave a pitiful squawk and sulked.

'That's Reggie, Morag and Elspeth's parrot – you met him last night,' George told Rachel. 'Reggie's fallen in love with your songbird. I left him with the Grumpy Sailor's barman. Apparently, Reggie wooed your father's left shoulder all night,' he added with a raised eyebrow.

'Love at first sight, eh?' Stewart scoffed. 'Who would have thought?'

Looking dead on her feet, Lorraine dished out the rest of the breakfast fare: bacon, sausages, scrambled eggs and thick buttered toast littered the kitchen table. 'Rachel – I'm going out to see Morag and Elspeth,' she informed her. 'They're taking me to see some of their friends this morning. I might get lucky and sell some of my perfumes.'

'When are you coming back, Mum?'

'I'll give you a ring when I'm done – see you later, boys...'

No sooner had Lorraine shut the front door, Stewart pulled a folded newspaper from his back pocket. 'It's all over the press this morning,' he said with grim resolve. 'PC Taylor's death is headline news.'

'Death by natural causes,' George said. 'Who are they trying to kid?'

'Supernatural sand devil would sell more newspapers,' added Rachel.

'A shaky photograph would have sold ten times more,' said Stewart.

'I saw his face staring up at the... I – I don't want to talk about it anymore,' Rachel said, pushed the newspaper away and changed the subject. 'So, do we have anything exciting planned for today?'

'If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to stick my head in your freezer?' George asked Rachel. 'The swelling on my head still refuses to go down.'

Stewart grinned. 'We came up trumps and scrumped a little bit more than a few spare parts last night,' he said winningly.

'You mean you stole something?' sighed Rachel heavily.

'Three somethings actually. They were lying under some coffins,' smiled Stewart. 'Alfred spotted them. I'm sure he's got x-ray vision.'

'What did you steal from Gribbles?' asked Rachel reluctantly.

'Three multicycles,' Stewart beamed and placed a dog-eared advert in front of her. 'It's a stroke of luck they run on Grubbins' honey.'

Rachel read Stewart's shabby leaflet twice over. 'It says the powered multicycles can move in *any* direction,' she said unimpressed. 'Sounds a load of hogwash to me. You know they'll say anything to sell rubbish.'

'Well, you can find out for yourself this morning,' Stewart told her.

'Um – we're all underage and not a driving license between us – so where are we going to ride them?' demanded Rachel at once.

'Don't worry, Rachel,' Stewart replied. 'Where we'll be riding even the police fear to tread,' he added slyly.

* * *

'Thank you, Mrs Mullins and good luck with your driving test tomorrow,' said Rachel to the elderly woman who had just given them a lift, much to the displeasure of her irate driving instructor, who bellowed directions into her deaf ear, as she had a couple of near misses and a slight mishap.

'Now, I'm not sure which one I'm going to feel sorry for tomorrow,' Stewart snorted. 'Her clapped out old car – or the driving examiner.'

'The long queue behind us didn't seem very friendly,' added George.

'I think Mrs Mullins has forgotten her car has a second gear,' said Rachel, somewhat annoyed. 'I hope Gladys gets her tram fixed soon.'

'Welcome to the oldest part of town – a sprawling reminder of days gone by and Victorian ingenuity,' said Stewart in an overinflated voice.

'You sound like a tour guide, Stew,' scoffed Rachel.

'Now, remember all of the buildings around here are unsafe, so it pays to be vigilant because a loud bang might bring them all down,' said Stewart ominously. 'Hey, I can see William and Alfred down by – oh, they're waving at us. C'mon you two – this is where the fun begins...'

Rachel eyed the sky with suspicion. The local weather forecaster had predicted good weather for Lower-Inkcome-by-the-sea, but she had her doubts, as a bunch of moody clouds had just rolled in from the north.

'About time you turned up,' said William irksomely.

'Well, we here now,' said Rachel. 'Is that Jack down there?'

'Yes – and he's with Mary,' Alfred replied. 'He's getting to grips with the multicycle, and I think he's better than you now, Stew.'

Stewart snorted. 'We'll see – we'll see,' he mocked playfully.

Jack joined them. 'It takes some getting used to – but I think I've mastered the basics,' he said. 'Hullo, Rachel – you haven't met Mary.'

'You've been lucky up to now,' muttered William under his breath.

The pencil-thin girl, with waist-long brunette hair, dismounted the multicycle. 'I heard what you did to Henry,' she told Rachel as they shook hands. 'I've been on the end of his cruel tongue on too many occasions at work – and I doubt they're as many snakes as slippery as him.'

'I thought Alice was joining us?' Rachel asked.

'Alice is working my shift today,' Mary replied. 'She's sorry she went off in a temper. She's going to meet up with the rest of us later.'

Stewart coughed. 'I think a tandem race should put these beauties through their paces,' he interrupted. 'I'm itching to get started.'

'Where do we turn around at?' Alfred asked.

'How about Gribble's Undertakers?' William replied.

'Perfect – oh, hang on a mo,' said Stewart. 'Someone's got to stay behind to officiate the proceedings and ensure it's all above board.'

'I'll stay,' Mary offered. 'Anyway, I don't feel safe on those things.'

'So, Jack – who's going to be your pillion passenger?' Stewart asked.

'I'll take Rachel,' he replied. 'No doubt she'll be safer with me.'

'Right, I'll take Alfred,' said Stewart.

'That leaves you with me, George,' beamed William.

'Watch William,' Alfred told George. 'He's always been a risk-taker.'

'OK, everyone, mount up...' said Stewart and leapt onto his saddle.

* * *

Rachel smelt the sweet-smelling fumes of the multicycles. The engines purred away like three contented cats. Their gyroscopic wheels spun slowly – kicking up plumes of dust along the litter-strewn street.

Jack wiggled the two joysticks that hugged the black bulbous fuel tank and adjusted the double-curved wing mirrors that stuck out on

stalks, reflecting the old town back at him. There weren't any useful dials on the multicycle – just an odd-looking glass thermometer that sat between the black frame and sweptback handlebar.

'Shouldn't we be wearing crash helmets?' Rachel asked.

'These contraptions are pretty safe,' William imparted. 'Here, watch this,' he added quickly and let go of his multicycle.

Rachel hadn't expected the multicycle to stay upright, but it had, and its engine purred even louder than before.

'Whoever invented these multicycles must be a mechanical genius,' said Stewart, sounding thoroughly impressed.

'And there are most certainly dead by now,' added Alfred. 'These things are as old as Bumble's candyfloss machine.'

Mary gave Jack an affectionate kiss on the cheek (however, William and Alfred looked horrified and appeared as if they were going to be sick).

'Try and stay in one piece, Jack,' pleaded Mary as she hugged him.

'Rachel will be my guardian angel,' he smiled.

'Do you have a handkerchief about your person?' Stewart asked Mary. 'It would be fun if you can start the race with it.'

'A lady is never without one,' Mary sniggered and delved into her handbag, and brought out a garish green one. 'Ah, this one will do nicely.'

'All right, you lot – it's time to line up,' said Stewart giddily. 'When the handkerchief hits the ground, it's everyone for themselves!'

'Hold on to my waist, Rachel,' Jack said as she got in behind him.

Tensions mounted.

'Ready... 3... 2... 1...' said Mary.

The multicycles' purring ramped up.

Mary's handkerchief wavered for a split-second and then nosedived into the ground. She spluttered as their gyroscopic wheels created a sudden dust storm that sent her handkerchief high into the sombre sky.

With the dust clouds left far behind, Jack accelerated and made a beeline for Stewart, who had managed to get a good head start.

Rachel held Jack's waist even tighter.

Jack's long hair battled against the rush of wind as they shot passed building after abandoned building. Rachel looked over her shoulder at William and George, who had fallen far behind, but their multicycle suddenly veered to the right and vanished into one of the squalid streets.

'RACHEL – HOLD ONTO YOUR STOMACH,' Jack bellowed over his shoulder. 'IT'S NOW A RACE OF WITS...'

Rachel's stomach lurched as their multicycle turned instantaneously into a grotty narrow side street. With the odd-looking mirrors to steer sideways, they raced and rumbled along the cobblestones at right angles.

'THERE GOES STEW,' Rachel bellowed.

'OK – I SEE HIM,' Jack bellowed. 'RIGHT, I'M GOING TO HAVE TO TAKE A RISKY SHORTCUT – NOW, HOLD ON TIGHT!'

Rachel didn't like the sound of that, but she had no choice as their multicycle quickly bumped back down a short flight of stairs.

With a sore spine and bruised neck, Rachel's head spun around, but she hadn't the foggiest idea where she was or where the rest of the boys were, and she hadn't seen any of them for the past couple of minutes –

William and George simply came out of nowhere. Stewart and Alfred were gaining on all of them, but they suddenly disappeared.

The three multicycles ploughed through the pounding rain.

Gribble's undertakers loomed directly ahead of them. They rode past the building at breakneck speed, narrowing avoiding the neglected sign that had fallen across the footpath and into the street.

'WE'RE ON THE HOME RUN,' Jack shouted, but he swerved violently, as Stewart and Alfred reappeared, racing out of the market square at great speed – almost slamming into Rachel's leg as they caught up.

Almost neck and neck, the two multicycles vied for the finishing line.

The rain came down in torrents; the gusting winds drove the rain sideways that took Jack's glasses with it. Cursing under his breath, he threw himself onto the fuel tank and bellowed at Rachel to do the same.

Jack's quick thinking had given them the edge. 'WE'RE GOING TO WIN – WE'RE GOING TO WIN –' he began.

But overcome with the feeling of utter dread, Rachel choked on her tongue, and she couldn't breathe as the silver blur slammed into them.

Her head spun with the multicycle, and with an almighty crunching sound, she saw nothing but Jack's hair as she fell sideways.

Seconds later, her body smashed into something soft and squishy that crumpled easily under her dead weight.

Gulping down deep breaths of brisk sea air, she rolled away from the black bags that had broken her fall. Through the driving rain, her eyes squinted across the soaked street, and she screamed out Jack's name.

Rachel rushed to her feet.

Lying with his head up against a marble water fountain, Jack coughed and spluttered up blood. She went down on her knees, forcing herself to stare into his battered bruised face, and the stomach-turning serrated cut above his right temple that went deep down to the bone.

Calmly, Stewart called the emergency services. 'The ambulance and police are on their way,' he told Rachel, but his face turned pale as Jack's blood dripped down his neck, sullyng the fountain's crystal-clear water.

George ripped his jacket off and dropped down beside Rachel.

Together, they carefully lifted Jack's head away from the edge of the fountain and pressed the folded jacket against his gaping neck wound.

'Jack... Jack, can you hear me?' Rachel implored.

His eyes slowly fluttered open, and she bent down so she could hear him above the driving squall that lashed her spirits as well as her back.

'I – I didn't see it coming,' Jack whispered, his wild eyes bursting with fear. '*The – the s-silver phantom came f-from nowhere.*'

Distant sounds of sirens echoed all around them.

Rachel leaned in close; Jack's face smelt of blood and fear, and her scar throbbed as she squeezed his icy cold hand. 'Help's on its way, Jack – just hold on,' she told him soothingly. 'I won't leave you – I promise.'

Jack grimaced. 'I'm so scared of losing Mary,' he shivered.

'Mary's coming, Jack – she's coming,' said Rachel tenderly.

'I – I can hear them calling me,' rambled Jack, the tremor in his voice laced with foreboding. 'I'm not strong enough to keep them all back.'

'He's getting delirious,' said George. '*Where's that damn ambulance?*'

Through Jack's pleading bloodshot eyes, he commanded, '*Promise me, Rachel – promise me you'll bring Mary back to me...*'

'I promise, Jack – I swear I'll bring her back to you,' she wept openly, squeezing his hand more tenderly, not caring her scar hurt even more.

Jack's face drew comfort from her calming words and returned her reassuring squeeze. His chest rose and fell, and his cold crystalline eyes stared up at the brooding sky that darkened as he took his last breath.

Flashing blue lights lit up the street. The ambulance rumbled along the wet cobblestones and came to a halt beside the swelling crowd. Umbrellas parted as two medics rushed over towards the water fountain.

'Excuse me, Miss – but we need to get to the patient.'

Rachel stared up into the uniformed man's concerned face. '*But I promised him – I promised I wouldn't leave him,*' she replied inconsolably.

'WHERE'S JACK – WHERE'S JACK –?'

The crowd parted once more.

Thoroughly drenched to the skin, Mary stood rigid to the spot – shocked by what she saw. With hesitant steps, she reached Jack's body and dropped to her trembling knees.

Rachel felt Mary's undying love for Jack overwhelming, and her anguished emotions threatened to overpower her own.

Mary took Jack's other hand, kissed it and held it against her cheek. *'Wherever you are, Jack – just remember... remember my heart will always belong to you – and I promise it always will,'* she said and fell against his chest, sobbing uncontrollably, but as Rachel went to comfort her, a pair of hands pulled her gently to her feet.

The familiar musty smell of perfume brought her back to her senses, and she wrapped her arms around her mother's waist. The street filled with a screeching siren, then a slamming door and hurried footsteps.

Out of the crowd, a tall man stepped forward and removed his flap cap. Rachel broke away from her mother's embrace and stared at him.

In plain clothes, Ian Inchman gave her a nod of understanding, and she understood she wasn't alone in her grief.

* * *

The Cooks' doorbell rang.

'It's time, Rachel,' Lorraine told her softly and kissed her head.

Rachel opened the front door. Ian Inchman stood glumly on her doorstep dressed in his full policeman's uniform. They said nothing as they walked towards the black saloon car. As the chauffeur opened the door, she gave her parents a resigned smile as they waved her goodbye.

The police horses pulled the glass carriages down the High Street.

They battled against the turbulent weather that had whipped up a raging storm. Lining the packed pavement, the town's people paid their last respects and lowered their heads as the coffins went by.

* * *

As her husband began his final journey, Hilary Taylor sobbed into Ian's shoulder. Rachel stood over Simon Taylor's coffin and held his children's hands as they cried at their father's grave.

When the vicar's sermon had finally concluded, Rachel grabbed a handful of dirt and paid her respects to a man she would never get to know. As she let the earth fall onto his coffin, she heard the vicar's moving words as he said, *'Your soul will always beat in the hearts of those who love you – may you find solace knowing that.'*

Rachel led Hilary's children back towards the saloon car.

A hand rested upon her shoulder. Ian managed to raise a reassuring smile. 'Hilary wanted me to thank you for coming to the funeral – and for comforting her children,' he told her warmly.

'Do you want me to come to the wake?' Rachel asked.

Ian shook his head. 'Your parents and friends will miss you if you don't go to the funeral,' he said. 'And I believe Jack would miss you, too.'

'I didn't know Jack very well,' Rachel replied.

'But you were with him when he needed you the most,' Ian said, 'and that's the makings of a true friend.'

* * *

Rachel stood on the highest hillock for miles around.

In amongst the crumbling gravestones, she faced the wild ocean waves and wallowed in misery. The stormy clouds reflected her dire mood as she watched Jack's family, friends and colleagues congregate around his open grave. Every time she put a foot forward to join them, she held back, recalling Jack's cold staring eyes.

The oak trees lumbered back and forth in the storm that came ashore early that morning, hampering the mourners as they paid their respects.

Rachel suddenly jumped, startled by the man that had stepped out from the trunk of the tallest oak.

'Sorry, but am I disturbing you?'

'No – no, you're not,' Rachel replied.

The dapper clean-shaven man drew near. He wore a black suit and tie with a dazzling crisp white shirt; his black bowler hat almost hid his greying temples. He leant on his black umbrella and peered down at the mourners. 'It's hard enough to face one's own mortality – but it's an insurmountable climb to face that of a loved one or a friend,' he told her.

Rachel stared into the man's kind face. 'I – I just can't face them,' she said sorrowfully, wringing her hands. 'I've just paid my respects to someone I never even knew. *I just can't go through that again!*'

The man looked at her with sad eyes. 'It's not your family or friends you cannot face. You must put your guilt aside and live the life he'll never have,' he urged. 'If nothing else – you owe that much to your friend.'

Rachel's smile broke free. 'I'm Rachel Cook,' she said and held out her hand. 'It's a pleasure to meet you... Mr?'

'I'm Doctor Gloucester – I'm an old friend of the family,' he said and returned her handshake with one of the brightest smiles she'd ever seen.

‘Doctor Gloucester... um, would you come and pay your respects?’ she asked. ‘I think my friend Jack would appreciate it.’

‘I would be honoured, Rachel,’ he nodded and fumbled with his enormous umbrella. ‘And please call me Gilbert – all my friends do.’

Impervious to the blustery weather that battered the hillock, he held his umbrella over them and gave her a potted history of Lower-Inkcome-by-the-sea as they snaked their way down the shingled path.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Devil's Advocate

Lorraine sighed. 'Rachel's been like this for ages,' she whispered to Paul, who'd given up trying to read his book on birds. 'You know she hasn't called her friends – or stepped outside the front door since the funerals.'

'She'll soon snap out of it,' he replied unconvincingly.

'She needs something to take her mind off everything – you know, it's not healthy mooching around and dwelling on it all –'

The Cooks' doorbell rang.

At the breakfast table, Rachel stared vacantly into her porridge. As she stirred her spoon, she watched the strawberry jam swirl into the lumpy mess of oats and water. With a jumble of unhappy thoughts still with her, she pushed the bowl aside and sipped on her tepid tea.

The door creaked opened, and George came through. 'Rachel, can I come in?' he asked with some trepidation, sensing her sadness.

Rachel raised a faint smile. 'You're always welcome here, George,' she told him. 'Have you had breakfast yet?'

'Well, yes – but I wouldn't call Morag and Elspeth's breakfast exactly filling or tasty,' he told her bitterly. 'No wonder they're so thin, they hardly eat anything. Next-door's rabbit eats better than I do, so I'm thinking of moving into its hutch,' he added with a creeping smirk.

'Oh, I forgot to ask you, George,' said Lorraine as she bustled into the room. 'How's Reggie's love life?' she added whimsically, glancing at the empty space on the wall where the Cooks' cuckoo clock used to be.

'Morag and Elspeth are thrilled that Reggie's settled down at last,' he chortled. 'Well, at least he gets to see the love of his life on the hour.'

George and Rachel sniffed the air.

Paul poked his head around the door. 'Anyone up for a bacon sarnie?' he asked them with a broad smile. 'They're curling up at the edges and looking sorry for themselves, so I've decided to cook the lot.'

George looked like he wanted to burst into tears. 'I would love some sarnies, Mr Cook,' he drooled, 'but do you have any brown sauce?'

'Well, of course, I do – and it would be sacrilege not to put the sauce of the Gods between those fatty buns.'

* * *

Grease dribbled down Rachel's chin. As she watched her parents potter about in their windy, untamed garden, her mother idly gathered up the

whiplashed washing and behind her, looking just as bored, her father battled the elements, holding onto the wicker basket as he stifled another one of his gargantuan yawns, his other hand pinning his hairpiece down.

Rachel gulped down the dregs of her tea and gave her friend a furtive glance. 'George, have you thought about the island lately?' she asked.

His face fell. 'My memory's still a bit fuzzy,' he replied, 'but perhaps my father and brother were just ghosts come back to haunt me.'

'Your father and brother were real enough,' said Rachel pressingly, 'but you're right – my memory's started playing up as well.'

'Well, I'm glad the island's gone,' George growled. 'The more I think about the place – the more my mind wants to forget about it.'

'I wish I could forget that creature in the fog,' said Rachel grimly. 'I don't know what would have happened if that pony hadn't come to my rescue. I wonder where Larry and Lydia took them. We owe those ponies a sack of carrots and a bag of sugar lumps.'

'I heard Morag whispering to Elspeth about an animal sanctuary called Chiefton Priory that's high up in the Inklings. They mentioned the pit ponies, so they've probably taken them there,' George told her.

Rachel stared at her parents then back at George. 'Come to think of it, I heard my parents chatting about Chiefton Priory only the other day. *The Weekly Wrap* mentioned something about the theft of some animals,' she added, feeling quite pleased with herself, as she had remembered the small snippet of news from her father's local rag.

'As we're both fairly new here, I think it would be a good idea if we read up on the local history,' said George. 'I know next to nothing about this town – or maybe my mind's just playing tricks on me again.'

'My parents were talking about the odd goings-on around town, and what with that sand devil we encountered at Gribble's scrapyard, it's about time we investigated, and I think reading some past newspapers would be a good starting point,' she added poignantly.

'So, what's our first step?'

Rachel beamed. 'Well, we'll need to visit the town's fountain of all knowledge,' she said with a trickle of a chuckle.

'Where on earth's that?'

'Where else, but the town library –' Rachel began.

Cries of jubilation came flooding in from the cul-de-sac.

Rachel looked through the living room window and spotted Stewart dancing a jig as he held up a newspaper – pointing at the front headline.

The Cooks' doorbell remained silent, but frantic knuckles knocked on their front door, and Stewart shouted, 'THEY'VE GOT HIM – THEY'VE GOT THE BOUNDER THAT KILLED JACK.'

Rachel threw open the front door and Stewart, Alfred and William tumbled over the threshold. They followed her hurriedly into the kitchen and gathered around Stewart, who smartly drew up a chair and slammed a freshly printed newspaper down on the table.

Rachel and George stared at *The Weekly Wrap's* overdramatic headline, and they read the news article with more than a pinch of salt:

Fergus Triumphs Again!

As we go to print, we can confirm that Commissioner Fergus McDonald captured the suspected murderer and part-time drunk, Stanley Croom, singlehandedly, when he attempted to evade capture down at the Grumpy Sailor. When interviewing the brave Commissioner, the plucky sixty-year-old said...

Directly above the farcical and outlandish news article, the stark picture of Henry Silverback's cowering chauffeur, Stanley Croom, knelt in the children's paddling pool with Fergus leering over him with a pair of shiny handcuffs like some freaky Halloween ghoul.

William elbowed Alfred, and their happy faces bloomed into pure joy. 'And we've got some more brilliant news to tell you,' Alfred smirked. 'Well?' Rachel demanded. 'Our school's on fire!' William chimed.

* * *

'Madness – sheer madness,' spouted Paul from the couch as he watched the local evening news with a mug of steaming hot tea in one hand and a freshly made egg and cress sandwich in the other.

Lorraine bustled into the dining room and stared at the television.

'Gravelings is nothing but a charred shell, but the teachers are still on the picket line demanding better pay and conditions,' he added.

Rachel sat quietly at the dining room table with her head buried in Lionel Warbler's book. Like a thirsty dog, she lapped up his discussion about *The Whys and Whatnots on Breeding Rare Birds in Captivity*.

Breeding the Snotty Speckled Gizzard wasn't for the faint-hearted:

- (1. *Pepper Spray*
- (2. *Patience (lots of it)*
- (3. *Long-Nosed Loop Pole*
- (4. *Heavy-Duty Rubber Gloves*
- (5. *Heavy-Duty Wading Boots*
- (6. *Two Extended Pipe Cleaners*
- (7. *Swimming Goggles and a Snorkel*
- (8. *Names and addresses of your next of kin*
- (9. *Absolutely no sense of humour, whatsoever*

Rachel had just finished reading the red section on why you must never, under any circumstances, laugh, giggle or chuckle at the Snotty Speckled Gizzard during its mating ritual, when the phone rang.

Her mother picked it up and spent an hour in whispered conversation with the unknown caller. Her porcelain skin flushed as she called Paul into the kitchen. Her mother gave her a hurried smile and then closed the door. Rachel tiptoed furtively to the kitchen door and eavesdropped.

Faint murmurings and then a sharp scream of pain came and went.

With her ear pressing harder against the door, she heard faint sounds of her father crying, and then he said, *'But what about our daughter?'*

'It's all in hand,' Lorraine cooed. *'I need to speak to Gilbert about her. She's almost eleven, and she needs to be protected – they all do.'*

* * *

The Cooks' doorbell rang.

'C'mon, Paul – we mustn't be late,' Lorraine yelled.

Rachel opened the front door.

Once again, Ian Inchman stood on the doorstep dressed in his full policeman's uniform. George stood uncomfortably beside him, garbed in a dreary grey woollen suit that looked extremely itchy.

Rachel gave them a warm smile. Ian hadn't shaved, and she noticed his hair had grown over the tops of his ears.

Paul rushed down the spiral staircase and adjusted his bowtie in the mirror. *'Morning all,'* he said, and they all exchanged pleasantries.

'We better get going,' said Ian cajolingly. *'The court hearing begins at eleven o'clock. I've already reserved our places in the public gallery.'*

* * *

The Motte & Bailey Crown Court stood imposingly on a high outcrop of rocks. The towering charcoal cathedral-sized stone fortress cascaded down to a raised bank of earthworks. Itching to break its banks, the water from a weeks' worth of rain teetered on the brim of the fortress's ditch.

Ian's police car rolled over the flying bridge's wooden slats. Narrowly missing a couple of jabbering barristers, the police car rumbled over the slippery cobblestones that led into the castle's grim-looking courtyard.

Rachel stretched her legs in the kidney-shaped courtyard that hadn't really changed since its historical heyday: the chapel stood back on high, overshadowed by the barracks; the working stables and forges completed the medieval fortress's austere look.

'We should have enough time to have a quick cuppa and a bite to eat in the court's cafeteria,' Ian informed the Cooks. 'Try their apple fritters – they're really scrummy. Barker's Bakery really know their pastries.'

* * *

Paul took another hefty bite and scowled down at his flaky pastry. 'The thieving toerag – the audacity of the man,' he said bitterly. 'This pastry is definitely my secret recipe. If I ever see Lovejoy again – I'm going to wring his scrawny neck until he begs for mercy!'

'Then you wouldn't get your recipe book back,' Lorraine informed him. 'You know Lovejoy's hidden it somewhere in the bakery.'

'I wonder if Ian would raid Barker's Bakery for me,' Paul snarled.

'I think Ian has other problems right now...' Lorraine replied.

Rachel tried to contain her irritation: the vending machine buzzed as she hit it again, but the chocolate bar refused to drop into the metal bin.

Perhaps it was for best, she mused. Those sarnies were still on her hips.

'A month off work – impossible...' the gruff indignant voice said.

Rachel refilled her soda cup and spied on Ian and Commissioner Fergus McDonald, whose anger had reached way beyond boiling point.

'DS Sandhurst can cover for me, sir,' said Ian exasperatedly.

'WHAT!' Fergus thundered. 'Have you forgotten that DS Sandhurst is four months pregnant? I'm not having my favourite niece fighting crime and pounding the beat, while you're sunning yourself on some beach.'

'But, sir –'

‘– You can have a week off and that’s final – and – and get your hair cut before you come back...’

* * *

The Cooks stood outside the court gallery.

Ian beckoned them to take their places. Rachel hadn’t seen the inside of a courtroom before, so she hadn’t had any expectations.

The gallery’s uncomfortable dark walnut pews certainly didn’t have enough elbow room as loads of people piled inside. The impractical six-pointed arched heraldic windows let in the sallow sunlight, and twenty-four torches flickered dimly as they lit little of the austere room and the faded tapestries that hung limply from every stark black-painted wall.

Rachel wriggled uncomfortably on the knotty bench, and with the falling temperature, it hadn’t helped her grim mood in the gallery: it felt like bags of ice-cubes were lying directly under her derriere.

George tapped her on the shoulder and whispered, ‘*We’re all here.*’

Rachel looked over her shoulder. Stewart, Alfred and William were huddled together. Alice and Mary sat with their parents, but she couldn’t see Jack’s parents at all. Rachel had to budge up, as a thin-faced woman squeezed in next to her – cradling her weathered leather handbag.

The gallery door closed, and the courtroom fell silent.

A barrister glided into the courtroom. The short-wigged scrawny man almost tripped over his long black robes as he approached the bench. He adjusted his stiff white wing collar and cleared his throat.

‘*That’s Wilfred Silverback,*’ snarled George scathingly into Rachel’s ear.

Wilfred came to attention with military precision as a furred scarlet-robed man with a full-bottom wig sauntered to the bench. ‘Would you please be upstanding for his lordship, Judge Henry Silverback,’ he announced regally and bowed to his brother.

Rachel didn’t want to stand, but she rose to her feet with everyone else and dragged George up with her; however, the woman sitting beside her stayed put and seethed – glaring daggers at the smug-looking judge.

Henry pulled up his chair, laid his square black cap on the table and sat down. Everyone followed his lead and sat back down in stilted silence.

Henry glanced around the court with indifference and checked his fingernails. With the speed of a sleepy tortoise, he grabbed his hardwood gavel and smacked it against the sound block. Inside the dock, Rachel

watched a gaunt hollow-cheeked man stumble up the short steps. The woman beside her gasped, and she wept quietly to herself.

'*The defendant will rise*,' Wilfred snapped.

Stanley Croom's lanky frame didn't budge an inch, so his burly custody officer pulled him up instead.

'Are you Stanley Croom of Peeler's Halfway House, Half Penny Lane, Lower-Inkcome-by-the-sea?' asked Wilfred succinctly.

Henry smiled and flicked a bit of fluff off his robe.

'Y-yes – yes, I-I am,' Stanley slurred, slumping over like a ragdoll.

'If it pleases the court – I will now read out the charges against Stanley Croom,' Wilfred pronounced.

Henry just nodded and stifled a yawn.

'Stanley Croom, you are hereby charged with the heinous murder of Jack Partridge, residing at twenty-seven, New Cross Avenue, Lower-Inkcome-by-the-sea,' Wilfred boomed so loudly, even the back of the gallery could hear his clear, commanding voice.

Rachel heard faint sobbing behind her.

'How do you plead?' Wilfred demanded.

The woman beside Rachel suddenly flew off her seat. 'NOT BLEEDIN' GUILTY,' she bellowed with unrestrained boiling rage. 'DO YOU HEAR ME DOWN THERE – MY HUSBAND'S NOT BLEEDIN' GUILTY!'

Henry choked on his tongue. '*S-silence in c-court*,' he spluttered, taken by surprise by the woman's sudden outburst. 'I WILL NOT TOLERATE THIS OUTRAGE IN MY COURT.'

Two security guards edged towards her, but the outraged woman sat back down again. Rachel felt the woman's coiled rage: it hadn't tempered but festered as Wilfred pressed on with the rest of the charges.

'Stanley Croom, you are also accused of being drunk in charge of a motorised vehicle, a silver Rolls Royce Phantom,' Wilfred added and scrutinised Stanley with an unwavering gaze. 'How do you plead –?'

A court usher rushed down the aisle.

Henry suddenly took an interest in the proceedings.

The panting usher scuttled up to Wilfred and handed him a note. The usher then stepped towards Commissioner McDonald, who shook the usher's hand and handed him a rather thick envelope.

Rachel looked on as the usher trotted to the back of the gallery and dropped out of sight. With a stroke of luck, her keen eyes spotted the usher's reflection in the shiny medieval shield that hung on the wall. The usher's clear reflection sat down on a black bench, gave the envelope a puckered kiss and then stashed it into a battered brown briefcase.

'Is there a problem?' Henry barked at Wilfred.

'N-no, y-your lordship... well, um... I just need a few moments to read this new evidence,' he replied, a little hot around the collar.

Henry let out a long overdramatic sigh. 'It was my understanding that you had this case firmly in your grasp?' he growled aggressively. 'You assured me that you had all the facts... facts that would prove that the defendant is guilty beyond reproach – or maybe I misheard you?'

Stanley Croom kept his head down.

Wilfred fumed, but he quickly composed himself. 'If your lordship is familiar with the case of Johnson vs Johnson vs Johnson, then your lordship must be fully aware that the presiding judge must, in all cases, review said new evidence before the trial commences,' he told him stiffly. 'I must therefore ask – did you have prior knowledge of this new evidence against the defendant, Stanley Croom – or did I mishear you?'

Henry's purple face scowled down at Wilfred.

Wilfred returned his cutting stare. 'Well, your lordship – did you or did you not have prior knowledge of this new evidence that I now have in my possession?' Wilfred demanded at once.

'W-well – well, of course, I had prior knowledge,' Henry snapped, his right eye developing a sudden nervous twitch. 'What do you take me for – some kind of blundering buffoon?' he added gruffly.

Wilfred's smirk only lasted a moment, but the entire gallery saw his one-upmanship against his younger brother.

'NOW, WE'VE WASTED ENOUGH TIME ON THIS ALREADY – SO READ THIS NEW EVIDENCE TO THE COURT!' added Henry thunderously.

The woman beside Rachel fumed uncontrollably. The pockmarked man to her right patted her trembling hand affectionately and whispered soothingly, '*Will get through this, Doris – we always have.*'

'Stanley Croom, you are also accused of attempted murder of fourteen schoolteachers at Gravelings' school,' said Wilfred gravely, 'and wanton criminal damage by arson,' he added unsympathetically.

The gallery erupted in riotous behaviour.

'IT'S A BLEEDING STICH UP – STANLEY WOULDN'T EVEN HURT A FLIPPING FLY,' a man shouted, his challenge laced with bitter anger.

'STANLEY TOOK THE PLEDGE YEARS AGO – HE'S NO DRUNK.'

'THROW THESE OUTRAGEOUS CHARGES OUT OF COURT.'

Rachel felt her heart beat faster; she found it hard to breathe. Sweat glistened on her brow as she fought to keep the crowd's emotions back.

Henry shot to his feet as the gallery's raucous noise refused to die down. He banged his gavel repeatedly against the sound block to end the

pandemonium. *'I will have order in my court!'* he screamed, but nobody took a blind bit of notice, apart from Wilfred, whose smirk had returned.

Foaming spittle appeared on Henry's quivering lips, and his scarlet face scrunched up in a fearful rage. 'THIS COURT IS ADJOURNED – TAKE THE DEFENDANT BACK TO PRISON WHERE HE BELONGS,' he bellowed and bashed the gavel so hard against his sound block it split in half.

Weakened by pure loathing and the hate around her, Rachel barely had time to deflect Doris' throwing knife as it sliced towards the bench.

Ian lunged at Doris as she pulled another knife from her handbag.

As Ian and the two security guards wrestled Doris to the ground, she raged, 'BY GOD, HENRY – I'LL HAVE YOU – I'LL HAVE YOU BACK WHERE YOU BELONG – YOU SEE IF I DON'T!'

Rachel glanced down, but Henry wasn't listening: only his full-bottom wig remained – pinned to a gaudy tapestry by Doris' lethal blade.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Day of the Dead

Rachel's alarm clock said half-past two. Above the wind battering her bedroom window, she could still hear the raised voices filtering through the floorboards. Stifling a yawn, she sat on the top of the stairs and listened to parts of her parents' heated conversation.

'What if June Wrigley sees him – she'll probably have a heart attack?'

'OK, we'll tell him to avoid the *Frumpy Friar*.'

'But it's his local pub – he has to go in there.'

'They're just white lies.'

'Well, sleep on it – see how you feel in the morning...'

Paul flung open the kitchen door. '*You're mad – the lot of you – it will never work,*' he yelled and headed towards the couch to make up his bed.

* * *

Later that morning, Rachel couldn't stop yawning as she helped her mother with the cleaning and washing up. With the washing up all put away, she sat quietly at the kitchen table sipping on her tea and stared at her mother's back. Chewing the matter over, she couldn't hold it in any longer and said, 'Mum – why didn't you tell me you had a brother?'

Lorraine choked on her tea. Dabbing the tea stain on her floral dress with a wet cloth, she turned around and met her daughter's questioning eyes. 'How did you find out? Oh, it doesn't really matter now the cat's out of the bag,' she said resignedly.

'I heard you talking to Larry about him on board Suzy,' Rachel said.

Lorraine gathered her thoughts. 'Thomas disappeared a year after you were born,' she said dispiritedly. 'He's an explorer you see and an inventor, and he would often disappear for weeks on end. But as the months went by, I knew in my heart, he wouldn't be coming back.'

'D'you think he's still alive?' Rachel pressed her.

'We're twins – and you know what they say about them,' Lorraine replied with an odd look in her eye. 'If he were dead – I think I would know. Growing up together, we could always sense each other's mood.'

'What did he look like, Mum?'

'Well, he has long blond hair, and he's quite tall – about the same height as Ian,' she said thoughtfully. 'His blue eyes were bluer than any ocean – just like Ian's.'

'Maybe I'll get a chance to meet him someday.'

Lorraine gave her a brooding look. 'Um... about that,' she said, chewing her lower lip. 'We're all invited to a meeting tonight at The Nutty Pine. It has something to do with your education and your uncle.'

* * *

The sun sunk behind the moody clouds loitering on the horizon. Along the Forestry Glen, the chilled air grew colder as twilight fell. The Cooks walked quickly towards The Nutty Pine's gate. Lorraine knocked on the door. Rachel blew into her hands, but they didn't warm up against the sudden cold. George answered the door, and the Cooks piled inside.

Apart from their hosts, everyone rallied around the round pine table and sat down. Morag and Elspeth came bounding into the room with teapots aplenty. George grinned as he put an assortment of pastries down beside everyone's steaming cup of tea. Huddled together, Paul and Gladys were too busy talking and laughing to notice the toing and froing.

At the table, Rachel nudged George's elbow and whispered, '*George, have you any idea what this is all about?*'

George just shook his head. They both watched Morag close the door to the room, and they gazed at the smoky fire as Elspeth stoked the coals.

With the blazing heat warming the cockles of their hearts, Lorraine piped up and said, 'At least most of you know why we're all here tonight.'

She sipped thoughtfully on her tea and added, 'As you all know, Henry Silverback's chauffeur, Stanley Croom, has been falsely charged with attempted murder and burning down Gravelings' school. We are here tonight to discuss our children's education – and this would be a simple matter if my brother were here tonight.'

'Why's that, Mum?' asked Rachel with determined curiosity.

Lorraine looked very uncomfortable and averted her eyes. 'Well, just before Thomas disappeared all those years ago, he bought Bellingtons and set up a boarding school there,' Lorraine informed her. 'He wanted to help the children who were having trouble at home – and at school.'

'And that's why we're here tonight,' Gilbert added. 'Bellingtons is barely half full – so we're proposing that Gravelings' schoolteachers and its pupils relocate there for the foreseeable future.'

'But without Thomas, we have no legal power to do this,' said Morag.

'Where is he? He should be here by now –' Elspeth began.

The hard knock on The Nutty Pine's front door echoed around the room. Lorraine strode to the living room door and opened it, but she

hesitated and said to everyone in the room, 'If we're fooled by him – we might have a chance in fooling everyone else.'

The front door opened and closed.

The rushed muffled voices at the door petered out, and a man stepped through the living room door and beamed back at their shocked faces.

'Oh, my giddy aunt,' Paul spluttered.

'Amazing – just amazing,' Gilbert spouted.

'I – I can't tell the difference,' Elspeth said, utterly spellbound.

Lorraine gently closed the door, holding back her tears.

The long blond-headed man came into the room and removed his trilby hat. His bright blue eyes peered at every face in turn. 'I could do with a pint of ale – but I'll settle for a cuppa with two sugars,' he said with the broadest smile.

'The – the voice is s-spot on,' Paul blubbered.

'I believe most of you have met my brother, Thomas Shire,' said Lorraine sombrely. 'Now, I think we could all do with a fresh cup of tea.'

With a goofy grin, Thomas Shire walked up to Rachel and George and asked, 'Hullo, you two – don't you recognise the long arm of the law?'

Rachel studied his face, but she still said hesitantly, 'Ian... um... is that really you beneath that fake tan and long blond hair?'

'Ah, you found me out,' he chuckled.

'That's a brilliant disguise, Ian,' George told him, 'and I bet even Commissioner McDonald wouldn't recognise you now.'

'Right, we need to make sure your handwriting is up to scratch,' Lorraine told Ian. 'I hope you've been busy practising the art of forgery?'

'I've learnt from the best,' he replied. 'From now on, I'm going to have to keep a closer eye on my two next-door neighbours. William and Alfred have some pretty impressive criminal skills up their sleeves.'

'You didn't tell them about our plan,' said Lorraine, a little worried.

'Nope – I just said I needed their help on a case,' replied Ian slyly.

'Don't encourage those two reprobates,' Rachel told Ian warningly. 'The Grimhall brothers are bad enough, and I'm pretty sure those two miscreants are responsible for half of the crime in the countryside.'

Ian chuckled. 'Oh, the Grimhalls won't be bothering anyone soon,' he snorted. 'They tried to steal Bob Jones' beehives again. Two thousand volts and Finkle snapping at their singed heels sent them packing into the nearest hospital – and it's going to take a while for their hair to come back down to earth again.'

Lorraine folded her arms and gave Ian a strong penetrating stare. 'Don't forget Thomas' mannerisms,' she told him. 'Now, rubbing your

left earlobe when you're puzzled is very important. It's his little quirks that will add to your disguise, so even his closest friends will be fooled.'

'Commissioner McDonald would hang and quarter me if he knew what I was about to do,' Ian griped, but he brushed those thoughts aside. 'OK, how do we bring Professor Thomas Shire back from the dead?'

'That's easy,' Elspeth said. 'I know the editor of *The Weekly Wrap*. I can make you front-page news, so all we need is a plausible story for your disappearance – and especially where you've been all this time.'

'How about telling them you were exploring the darkest regions of Africa, but you were captured by cannibals and escaped,' George offered.

'For ten years!' Rachel retorted. 'Well, unless Mrs Mullins drove him there and back – nobody's going to believe that.'

George returned Rachel's simmering grin.

'Might I make a suggestion,' Gilbert interjected. Everyone fell silent and turned to face him. 'There's an island about ten miles off the coast. Bellingtons' pupils make regular visits there to further their education. The monks run it, and they like to keep to themselves, but they help us out when asked. Thomas owns the island, so it wouldn't be a long shot to tell the newspaper he's been meditating there for all this time.'

'Sounds like a plan,' Paul said.

Everyone nodded their approval.

'I would like to point out that Thomas isn't exactly on speaking terms with the monks at this present time,' added Gilbert despairingly. 'I hope the monks don't get wind of our little subterfuge.'

'Bellingtons' headmistress isn't going to like Thomas turning up out of the blue – and telling her what to do,' said Gladys cautiously. 'Rose Dandelion is as stubborn as a pack of mules and then some.'

'All Ian has to do is walk around the school as if he owns the place,' said George. 'I'm pretty sure that will help him cement his disguise.'

'Well, I better be going,' Ian told them, placing his trilby hat back on his head. He walked to the door and faced them. 'Professor Thomas Shire wishes you all a very good night,' he chortled and departed with all haste.

Rachel's head throbbed. As Ian's new persona said goodbye for the last time, his trilby hat triggered a memory she thought she had utterly forgotten, so she reached down into her backpack and rummaged about.

With a strained expression, she caught her mother's eye. 'Mum, I've just remembered something... um... when we were on the island – George's father wanted me to give you this,' she told her and placed the opened wax paper parchment onto the table. 'Sir James Browning sends

his regards,' she added in awe as minuscule forks of blue lightning danced back and forth across the quivering serrated black horn.

Teacups tumbled, and Morag and Elspeth looked half scared to death.

Gilbert's cheeks drained of colour, and he quickly drew up a chair. 'Now listen, Rachel – what else did Sir James tell you? Be honest and leave nothing out,' he said gravely and stared at every shocked face in the room. 'Our lives might depend on it,' he added with a haunted look.

From the other side of the room, Reggie flew off his perch and landed on the squattest teapot. Clawing at the thick brown cosy, it ruffled its green feathers and squawked, 'Browning – Captain Browning, *The Scarlet Lady* is lost – shall I give the order to abandon ship?'

* * *

'Mum, have you seen Gladys lately?' asked Rachel thoughtfully.

'Er – only briefly,' she replied absentmindedly, removing the dark cobwebs above the kitchen cabinets with a frilly pink duster. 'There's been a surge of tourists since the Bore wave hit the esplanade. She's been busy keeping up with the demand. Eddie's business is doing extremely well, too, and he's milking it for all its worth.'

Paul came into the kitchen carrying a wicker basket. He began pairing his socks in a foul temper. 'Blasted weather. That's another three socks lost at sea,' he grumbled. 'I'm going to have to weld my socks to the washing line if this blustery wind doesn't ease off.'

'They've probably found a good home by now, Dad,' Rachel chuckled. 'Maybe Gladys' pet lobster is using them for mittens.'

'I better pop into town and buy some more,' he huffed. 'Anyway, I have some books to return to the library, and I don't want to feel the wrath of Miss McKenzie when she's in one of her moods. I've seen her make grown men cry with just one look.'

'D'you mind if George and I cadge a lift?' Rachel asked. 'I think it's about time I joined the local library.'

'You better get your skates on, Rachel,' Paul said. 'What with all these council cuts – the library is bound to be in their sights for closure.'

'I'll call Alice and see if she wants to meet up.'

* * *

'Damn and blast that woman,' Paul blustered, tooting his horn for the umpteenth time. 'How on earth did she pass her driving test?'

'At least Mrs Mullins is in second gear,' Rachel grinned. 'It's a big improvement, don't you think, George?'

'Well, yes – but isn't it against the law to crochet while driving?' he replied. 'That large ball of wool is blocking her front windscreen.'

'This is ridiculous,' Paul roared, and in a furious rage, he threw the steering wheel so hard to the left, the van tipped over on two wheels, then lurched forward and took off at speed, narrowly missing a flock of tourists who were feeding a flock of seagulls by the roadside.

Rachel gripped the vinyl seat cover and prayed the van's brakes wouldn't let them down again. Her father hadn't paid any heed to the speed bumps. Even George look unwell, and his face matched the green traffic light up ahead. With a determined look in his eyes, Paul put his foot down and whooped as he beat the amber light, but he slammed on the brakes and fumed, as Mrs Mullins had ignored the red traffic light and her car now chugged right in front of him.

* * *

Without any regard for pedestrians, Paul bounced his van over the kerb and into the last parking spot in the street, much to the annoyance of the mayor's driver, who waived a clenched fist out of the posh saloon car's window, cursing so colourfully, it would've made a sailor blush.

'Must dash – would you lock it up for me, George?' Paul asked, and without waiting for an answer, he sped off down the well-worn footpath.

They watched Paul as he pushed and elbowed his way through the growing crowd of oddly dressed men and women.

'I can't see Alice,' George told Rachel. 'Maybe she's inside.'

Rachel walked a few paces along the pavement; however, she stopped and earwigged on a huddled group that squealed with excitement.

'I can't believe I'm actually going to meet him,' the sprightly woman told the group as she bounced up and down on her toes.

'I want to ask him about the *Lesser Spotted Gillymop*,' announced the grizzled man with the beehive hat. 'I'm fascinated by its breeding habits. You know they have to tickle one another before they mate – and it can last up to two hours. Absolutely fascinating...'

Rachel stood by the library's entrance.

George eyed the strange tightly knit groups of people jabbering away nineteen to the dozen. 'Hey, Rachel – what's with all the people?' he asked keenly. 'Are they going to some kind of weird fancy dress party?'

'No, George – they're called Twitchers,' she informed him. 'They get very excited if they see a rare bird – now, if I were you, I wouldn't get too close to them. I passed that lot over by the post office, and they smelt of mildew, mothballs and mulled wine.'

'But why are they here?' George quizzed her, still confused.

'Well, they are either here to see Miss McKenzie,' Rachel scoffed, 'or they're here to see this man,' she added brightly, pointing at the poster:

Calling all Twitchers both Near and Far

Come and meet L.C Warbler at noon today

Lionel will be signing his new book. Please purchase your copy from Miss McKenzie, who will be happy to assist you.

The Whys and Whatnots of Twitching for the Uninitiated
(Free novelty quill with every purchase)

'Apparently, he's very famous in the Twitching world,' Rachel told him. 'I've read a couple of his books, and they were pretty interesting. Er – why are you looking at me like that?'

'I'm worried you're going to turn into one of them,' George grinned.

With the broadest of smiles, Rachel pushed the library door open...

Across the room, her father looked extremely agitated behind Mrs Mullins, who had dumped an enormous stack of books into the arms of a severe-looking middle-aged woman with black horn-rimmed glasses. Five long minutes later and towering over a black marble podium, the bespectacled librarian berated her father as he tried to turn a deaf ear.

'Now, Mr Cook – it's just gone noon, and the date on your books clearly state they should have been stamped a minute ago. I don't have the time to deal with such tardiness today. I have more pressing matters to attend to – ah, Mr Warbler – I'll be with you in a moment,' she said all high and mighty. 'I'm letting you off with a warning this time – but don't let it happen again,' she added stiffly and stamped his books.

'Now, I take it we've just watched Miss McKenzie in action,' Rachel sniggered. 'I don't think my father will be late with his books again.'

'What's up with her hair?' George asked, slightly bemused at her odd appearance. 'It looks like she's got a mad haystack on top of her head.'

'Ah, there you two are,' said Alice breathlessly, sidling up to them. 'It's a bit busy in here – what's going on?'

'Don't you know, Alice,' George chuckled. 'Lionel Warbler is signing his new book – and I think the man has just arrived,' he added with a nod at the door, feigning interest as the queue of Twitchers gaggled like geese and began clapping at the man in the smart chequered suit who bowed twice to his overenthusiastic audience.

Lionel had almost sat down, but he brushed his long white beard aside and stared spellbound at the man who had walked up to his table.

Rachel watched as her father laid his hand on the man's shoulder and whispered in his ear. Lionel suddenly grabbed Paul's shoulders, and they both began a merry dance. The queuing Twitchers joined in with their jubilation, clapping and cheering as someone played the harmonica.

Miss McKenzie stood behind them with the look of absolute horror plastered across her astonished face. Paul and Lionel started to sing another song, but Miss McKenzie wasn't having any of that nonsense in *her* library and coughed so loudly they both fell silent.

Paul bade Lionel farewell and rushed out of the library.

'What the dickens was that all about?' Rachel asked.

'Looks like their old friends,' George remarked. 'I hope your father remembers I've still got his car keys?'

'Oh, he's probably off to buy some more socks – he'll be back,' Rachel replied and thought about Lionel who, by her father's words, was as batty as a belfry, but now the two of them seemed like long lost friends.

The Twitchers' queue moved forward, and the book signing began.

Rachel had the strangest feeling someone was breathing down her – 'Can I help you?' a stern voice asked.

Rachel swung around and faced Miss McKenzie's icy cold stare; the librarian loomed over her with questioning grey eyes.

Rachel gulped. 'Um – I wish to join the library,' she said nervously.

'Do you now...' muttered Miss McKenzie very slowly and thoughtfully. 'Well, as you're underage, you have to be vetted before you're allowed to borrow books from the library, so you'll need to fill out a form.'

The librarian suddenly whipped out a thick form from nowhere.

'Er, can I borrow a pen?' Rachel asked, looking beyond her eyebrows.

Miss McKenzie sighed and plucked one of the pens she had sticking out of her wild bushy hair. 'Now, please write in clear block capitals – and no smudges,' she told Rachel, handing her a feather-quilled pen. 'You can use that empty table over there by the Horticultural Section.'

Nobody will disturb you there,' she added and marched towards Lionel, whose waning smile still kept the Twitchers' cameras clicking away.

Rachel sat down and faced the library form. George and Alice left her to get on with the endless questions. Alice wandered into the History Section, while George decided to delve into the Archaeology Section to see if he could dig anything up about the island that had sunk.

Rachel painstakingly answered question after question. The question about *Name your next of kin* seemed ridiculous, as she didn't realise libraries had such hidden dangers. The last question had her stumped: the form needed a signature from the parent, guardian or close family relative. Her father should've been back by now. The radiator beside her continued to scorch her right leg, so she decided to give the form to Miss McKenzie, who didn't appear *that* busy shuffling paper.

Rachel coughed. 'I've filled out the form,' she told Miss McKenzie, handing the form and pen back into the librarian's pale, freckled hands.

Miss McKenzie pushed her heavy glasses back onto the bridge of her nose and said, 'Now, I just need a signature from a family member –'

Rachel heard the whispering voices, and even the Twitchers fell silent as the man by the door let out a roar of laughter.

He strutted towards Miss McKenzie, who let out a cry of shocked surprise and grabbed the podium for support; she looked as if she was about to pass out as the tall, tanned man gave her a broad smile and said, 'Well, Gabby, it's been a long time – how the devil are you?'

Gabby McKenzie swooned.

Ian Inchman looked the part as he played Thomas Shire to perfection. His bottle-blond hair looked lighter in the library than in The Nutty Pine's dining room. Rachel had to play her part as well, and she had to remember that Ian Inchman lay buried beneath his clever disguise.

'Oh, Thomas, I – I thought I would never see you again,' said Gabby dreamily, clutching her hands against her chest as her eyelids fluttered.

Thomas went up to her; he took her trembling hands and patted them affectionately. 'How could a man forget a face like yours,' Thomas told her with a sultry sigh. 'Are you married yet, Gabby?'

'No, Thomas – I'm still waiting for the right man,' she replied, her cheeks blushing as her eyes misted over with raw emotion.

Rachel looked on in wonder. Ian's acting was so convincing, he had the librarian eating out of his hands, but she needed to break up these pair of lovebirds. 'Um, excuse me, Uncle Thomas – but I need you to sign my form,' she said. 'Dad's gone missing, so could you sign it instead?'

Gabby's eyes bloomed. 'Well, I never. I must be getting old – I forgot your sister had a daughter, Thomas, and what a charming young lady she is too,' she giggled, beaming down at Rachel, who couldn't believe the transformation that had come over the love-struck librarian. 'Oh, you don't need a form, you sweet, sweet child – your Professor Shire's niece and that should be good enough for anyone,' she added in a mad twitchy voice and ripped the form up into little bits and pieces.

As the form's confetti fell to the floor, somebody yelled, '*Thomas – it's good to see you're back in the land of the living.*'

Paul bustled into the library and shook Thomas' hand. 'It hasn't been the same with you gone, Thomas,' he told him enthusiastically.

'It's good to see you too, Paul – it's been too long,' said Thomas, an undertone of sadness in his voice as he returned Paul's firm handshake.

Paul instantly put his arm around his daughter's shoulders. 'And you've probably guessed this is our daughter, Rachel,' Paul told Thomas proudly. 'You didn't see her growing up, more's the pity.'

Thomas rubbed his left earlobe and said, 'And that is my loss.'

'Lorraine will be over the moon at your return,' Paul beamed.

Someone coughed. Alice and George stood behind them.

Rachel grinned and said, 'Uncle Thomas – I'd like you to meet my friends, George and Alice.'

Thomas shook their hands, but he peered over Rachel's shoulder. By the dusty Horticultural Section, a woman huddled against the steaming radiator with a couple of overstuffed suitcases by her side. 'Would you excuse me, I've just seen someone I know...' he said with concern.

George and Alice fell in behind Rachel as she followed Thomas, who approached the sobbing woman with softened steps. The smell of musty mulch and cut grass wafted up their nostrils. The lanky woman with the green hair looked up at Thomas as he touched her bony shoulder.

Rachel hadn't seen her Rural Studies teacher in months: Miss Minnie Moffatt looked downtrodden and appeared gaunter than ever.

'*Oh, Thomas – it's wonderful to see you again after all these years,*' said Minnie brokenheartedly. 'It's nice to have a friendly face to look into.'

Thomas went down on one knee. He gently squeezed her hand and asked, 'Minnie, why are you all alone in here and crying?'

'I've – I've just been sacked from Plums,' she replied, holding back a torrent of tears. 'I've been thrown out onto the street, as I can't afford to stay in my lodgings anymore – and my parents don't have any room.'

Rachel smiled down at Minnie. 'Look, Miss Moffatt – I'm sure my mum and dad will be able to put you up,' she told her.

George joined in the conversation. 'I'm lodging with Mrs Nook and Mrs Cranny. They live along the Forestry Glen,' he added. 'The top floor needs a good dusting, but it has a bed and a bathroom. They took in the likes of me – so I'm sure they would take in another lodger for free.'

Alice put her two pennies' worth in. 'I'll sleep on my floor if it means you have a place to stay,' she told Minnie.

With arms linked, Paul and Gladys joined them. 'C'mon, Minnie – you're coming home with me,' said Gladys firmly, her demand not expecting no for an answer. 'I have plenty of room back in my cottage.'

'I'll get the suitcases, Gladys,' said Paul.

Gladys gave Paul an affectionate pat on the shoulder.

Minnie wiped away her tears. 'And after all this time, I thought I didn't have a friend in the world,' she said pitifully.

'Friends are there when you need them the most,' said Rachel, but she stared at Thomas, recalling the wise words of the man beneath the tanned veneer and bright blue eyes.

* * *

'I go and make the arrangements,' said Thomas, chewing the news over.

Rachel and George had explained to Thomas the course of action that had transpired at The Nutty Pine. Of course, Thomas (or Ian) knew most of it, as he was there for the most part. Almost back to her old self, Minnie thanked Thomas with a warm hug. Bellingtons hadn't a Rural Studies teacher, but he told her he would create a post just for her.

'Well, I better go and see Lorraine,' Thomas said. 'Would you care to give me a lift, Gladys?'

'No problem,' she replied. 'I'm looking forward to peace and quiet on board my ship. I've just about had it up to my neck with tourists.'

'I s'ppose I had better get to work, too,' said Paul with a yawn so wide and for so long, a bluebottle flew into his mouth that made him splutter until he managed to spit most of it out.

'Do you mind if I tag along, Mr Cook?' George asked. 'I'll take some fresh sea air over this stuffy library,' he added, giving back his car keys.

'The m-more the m-merrier,' Paul coughed and had a funny feeling the fly was still tickling his tonsils. 'If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to have a quick cuppa and a bun at Aunt Mildred's Café. I still have a peculiar taste in my mouth,' he added sourly.

'That just leaves us, Alice,' Rachel said.

'I found something in the History Section,' said Alice with a raised eyebrow. 'I think you'll find it quite interesting.'

* * *

Rachel followed Alice into a tight dingy alcove. Hemmed in on all sides by musty bookcases and the odd dusty cobweb, they squeezed themselves into a couple of high-sided walnut chairs. On the rickety table, *The Weekly Wrap*'s front page displayed Professor Thomas Shire's grinning face.

Alice grabbed the newspaper and read the bottom page. 'Hmmm...' she said and handed it to Rachel. 'I think we can guess why Miss Moffatt was sacked,' she added angrily and pointed at the news article:

Crime Wave Hits Plums' Preparatory School

For the second time this year, the exclusive private school for girls was broken into. Miss Lucinda Pritchard told The Weekly Wrap: "It's the second theft from the school in so many months. They stole our crop of carrots back in the spring, and now they've stolen our entire crop of sprouts. The police are still baffled, but they think it was an inside job."

Police Constable Sam Scallops added: "We're doing everything in our power to locate these vegetarian villains. We've asked the public for any information about the stolen sprouts – but so far nobody's taken a bite."

'At least the pupils won't have to suffer eating sprouts at this year's Christmas dinner,' Rachel snorted. 'Plums stunk for months after some of the girls hid their unwanted sprouts around the school as a prank.'

'I missed Plums at first,' said Alice, reminiscing as she opened the leather-bound book that lay hidden beneath the newspaper. 'I got used to being Gravelings' Head Girl, and it was nice while it lasted – but like Miss Moffatt, I'm now out of a job.'

'So, what's so interesting about this book of yours?' Rachel asked. 'Oh, I see what you mean,' she added, recognising the towering fortress.

'Here's a picture of the Motte & Bailey Crown Court, right? Now, over the page...' Alice beamed, 'we have another fortress – or Bellingtons.'

'Looks more like a prison than a fortress,' Rachel hinted. 'Hmmm, what are those gigantic metal thingamajigs on top of the towers?'

From the doorway, someone cleared their throat. 'Sorry to intrude – but those thingamajigs are called *Devil's Cradles*,' said Lionel Warbler.

Rachel smiled back at him.

'I'm one of the school governors at Bellingtons,' Lionel added. 'I've spent hours watching the local birdlife up on those towers.'

'And you're an expert in breeding the *Snotty Speckled Gizzard*,' Rachel smirked and shook his hand. 'This is my friend Alice.'

'Ah, yes, Miss Winterbright – Thomas mentioned you a few moments ago,' he told her, shaking her offered hand. 'It appears that Miss Moffatt isn't the only one who's been offered a new position at Bellingtons.'

Rachel and Alice looked very puzzled.

'Thomas had a very long and heated conversation with Bellingtons' headmistress,' he added with rolling eyes. 'Rose wasn't too thrilled when Thomas told her Mr Pillings would be joining her as headmaster. Those two will be job sharing for a while, and as Bellingtons has recently lost its Head Boy and Girl, Thomas wanted Alice for the position. So, Miss Winterbright – d'you think you're up to the job of Head Girl?'

Alice blushed. 'Why, yes – thank you, Mr Warbler,' she replied. 'I accept the position of Head Girl,' she added graciously.

'Please call me Lionel,' he smiled. 'It's only Mr Warbler when I'm on duty at Bellingtons. Thomas also mentioned George Browning. Well, he wanted your opinion about offering him the position of Head Boy.'

'George would be perfect for the position,' said Alice enthusiastically.

'Right, I'll go and give George the good news,' Lionel said.

'George went to Aunt Mildred's Café for some tea,' Rachel offered.

'Well, I could do with a spot of lunch myself,' Lionel quipped, patting his stomach. 'Oops, I almost forgot. You're both going to be very busy tomorrow, so I think it would be a good idea if you have an early night.'

Rachel and Alice looked blankly at one another.

'I've already had a word with your parents, and they've agreed that Thomas will drive you to Bellingtons first thing tomorrow morning,' he added. 'Now, if were you, I would wear something warm like an overcoat for the journey, as *The Black Duke* can be decidedly draughty on those back roads – oh, and remember to bring a woolly hat. Even at this time of the year, those brisk northerly winds can still feel a bit on the nippy side...'

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Rhyming Thaumatrope

Lorraine gave her daughter a long lingering look then said, 'Hmmm...' and gestured her to twirl on the spot. Rachel felt like an overworked shop mannequin: her mother had just about exhausted her wardrobe.

'I s'ppose it will have to do. Thomas will be here soon,' said Lorraine.

'Oh, I almost forgot,' said Rachel and stepped towards the closet. 'I better take an overcoat and my thick bobble hat with me for the trip.'

'The weather forecast said it would be quite warm today.'

'Mr Warbler said Thomas' car can be a bit draughty –'

Sounding out from the cul-de-sac, a trilling horn tooted three times.

'It's been a long time, but that horn sounds familiar. Now, if I'm not mistaken that's Thomas' racing car, *The Black Duke*,' Lorraine grinned. 'Yes, I think one of your warmest overcoats would be most appropriate for the journey. I'll go and tell him you'll be down in a minute,' she added over her shoulder and rushed downstairs with giddy excitement.

* * *

The early morning heat quickly burnt off the cloying film of misty dew, and high above the horizon, the faint outline of the waxing moon began its never-ending ascent across the cloudless blue sky.

Rachel opened the front gate, but she struggled to get it to shut again. Perspiring in her heavy black overcoat that reeked of mothballs, she trudged towards Thomas' racing car that dominated the cul-de-sac.

The sporty open-top racing car looked in tiptop condition. The car's bodywork looked as clean as a whistle, and apart from the dinner plate-sized front headlights, the blackest paint smothered every square inch.

By an old converted gas lamppost, Lorraine and Thomas stood close together and chatted, and behind them, an excited group gathered, their swelling ranks in awe of the sight of the rare racing car in their mists.

Bundled up in their thick coats, George and Alice struggled to get out of the car's low-slung seats. Rachel sauntered over, sweltering under her hat and overcoat; however, she raised a smile, thinking she was half-dressed for an arctic expedition – not a pleasant day trip to the seaside.

'Isn't *The Black Duke* a beauty,' George informed Rachel wondrously.

'Thomas said it's one of a kind,' added Alice.

'I've only seen racing cars like these on old newsreels,' Rachel told them. 'It looks in good condition – but is it's roadworthy and taxed?'

'It's perfectly roadworthy, Rachel,' Thomas interjected with Lorraine glued to his side. 'Gladys mothballed my racing car ages ago, and she's been busy getting the old man ready for our little trip to Bellingtons. Now, as it's such a beautiful morning, I think we'll take the scenic route.'

'What's our itinerary for today?' Alice asked Thomas.

'Both you and George will be meeting your new headmistress, Mrs Rose Dandelion,' he told her cagily. 'And when you've met the rest of the staff, she's going to give you a guided tour of the school and its grounds.'

'So, I'm free to wander around the place on my own?' Rachel grinned.

'You're free to go anywhere – except for the animal enclosures,' Thomas insisted. 'Mr Warbler's told me about last year's unfortunate accident with a breeding pair of *Snotty Speckled Gizzards*, and the staff are still trying to clean the feathers and sticky goo off the enclosure walls.'

'No deaths, I hope?' Alice inquired.

'No – just a lengthy stay in the hospital wing,' Thomas imparted. 'I might add that Matron Crowling likes a squeaky clean, smooth-running hospital – and woe betide the patient that upsets her daily routine.'

'I bet her bedpans win awards for cleanliness?' George snorted.

Thomas grinned, removed his trilby hat and put it into his deep overcoat pocket. 'Oh, and there's just one other thing to remember. It's Bellingtons' sports day – and um... well, don't be surprised by what you see and hear,' he told the three of them. 'Their sports days are a little bit on the odd side,' he added humorously and with a pinch of precaution.

With the conversation ended, they said their goodbyes to Lorraine, who walked towards the front gate with a definite spring in her step.

* * *

The Black Duke spluttered and roared into life. With all its cylinders fired up and clattering away, Rachel settled back into her sleek seat right next to Thomas, who kept busy flicking switches, turning dials and mumbling away to himself, saying, 'Pressure looks, OK... Hmmm... Must keep an eye on that oil level... Well, that's most peculiar – oh, well, it will just have to do...'

'Best of three then,' George told Alice as they played rock-paper-scissors, but Alice lost the game, so it was up to her to make a good first impression with their new headmistress – much to George's relief.

Thomas reached down. 'Hello – what do we have here,' he muttered. Rachel peered over the black leather steering wheel.

Thomas pulled the string away from a small red lever and read the brown tag attached. 'Well, you've outdone yourself again Gladys. You've managed to repair it – now, what would I do without you,' he laughed.

Rachel gave Thomas a curious look. 'What's does it do?' she asked.

Thomas gave her a sly grin. '*Buckle up, Rachel,*' he beamed. 'You're in for quite a treat later on – but first, we have to circumnavigate the High Street and its never-ending roadworks and potholes...'

Rumbling over the High Street's cobblestones and speedbumps, *The Black Duke* turned just about everyone's head.

Thomas kept checking the temperature gauge and kept tapping it for good measure. 'My car needs the open road. It needs wide-open spaces – not this snail's pace... ah, at last, we've finally reached the eastern approach road,' he said joyously. 'It won't be long before you can stretch your legs again, old man,' he added placatingly, patting the dashboard affectionately with his black-gloved hand.

Like a coiled spring, *The Black Duke* took off down the road and met a sharp camber; it easily hugged the next three cambers with equal grace and speed. Thomas whooped as he put his foot down and overtook a train of tourists, zooming past their caravans at a frightening rate. The drive through the autumnal countryside ended as quickly as it had begun.

Rachel turned up her collar, as the stiff sea breeze had smacked her right in the chops. Thomas flipped a switch, and the car's scaly fishy-smelling canopy rolled over their heads and snapped firmly into place.

With a sharp turn to the right, they left the main road and weaved their way around the speed bumps and down towards the fisherman's cottages so fast, she wondered which one of them would barf first.

The Black Duke left the crumbling road, spun in the sand and came to a complete stop beside a windswept sign:

SATAN'S SCAR

Please be respectful and keep this beach as clean as a whistle

'Bellingtons is four miles across the sand flats,' Thomas told them. 'The tide's coming in, which is good news for *The Black Duke*.'

It didn't sound like good news to her, Rachel thought. Thomas' racing car looked less seaworthy than Gladys' tram.

'OK, check your seatbelts are secure,' Thomas added, looking deadly serious, 'as it's going to get a little bit bumpier from now on.'

* * *

Resting on the highest cliff top for miles around, a single wooden bench soaked up the unrelenting heat from the sun. Bleached and blistered, its bowed slats protested as a couple of old men sat down. In front of them, kitted out in tan shorts, black t-shirt and sandals, a young ginger-headed boy, opened up a cardboard box and assembled a large red kite.

'Now, Clive – remember to keep well back from the cliff's edge,' the greasy longhaired man said to the pale freckled-faced boy. 'Your mother won't be best pleased if anything happens to you again, and she's already put me on probation for losing you at last week's car boot sale.'

'And when did you ever take any notice of your grandparents?' the curly-headed man asked his friend with a mischievous glint in his eye.

'Maybe I enjoyed having a clip around the ear and the ruler across my knuckles,' the bald-headed man retorted with a canyon-wide grin.

Clive suddenly leapt to his feet. He grabbed the ball of string in one hand and launched his kite into the wind. His kite snaked across the sky, but it floundered and dived into a deep sand dune with a low thud.

Thoroughly distracted, Clive squinted as he stared beyond the sandy seashore at the white-tipped waves; his frown deepened as he thought about his question and asked, 'Granddad, I thought you said nobody's seen a whale around these shores for well over a hundred years?'

'That's right, Clive – why do you ask?'

'Um – because I think I see one swimming near the shore over there.'

The bench slats creaked once more. The podgy men panted over towards the cliff's edge. They gaped in wonder at the shadowy shape and the fifty-foot funnel of water spewing out of its blowhole.

* * *

With pure excitement, George screamed at the top of his lungs with Alice gripping his icy white knuckles out of sheer terror. Rachel's lungs hadn't time to scream as the pressure of *The Black Duke's* acceleration had pinned her down. Thomas' car had gurgled then shuddered as he'd flipped the red switch, and she felt as if a herd of elephants had just sat on her chest.

'THERE SHE BLOWS,' Thomas bellowed above the screaming engine and the rush of seawater pounding the metal framework.

As the car sliced through the pounding waves, Rachel wondered how Thomas could see out of his black leather goggles with its dazzling rainbow light, which glistened off the waterlogged windscreen.

The dashboard gauges were all in the red – except for one of them that had a trail of black smoke pouring out of the rim of its cracked glass.

Rachel felt her teeth would fall out long before the car would shake itself apart. Thomas clenched the steering wheel even harder, let out a loud whoop and roared, 'THE BLACK DUKE'S NEVER BEEN SO FAST!'

'Shouldn't we be heading back to shore?' pressed Alice.

'Oh, I think we can spare a few minutes for fun – don't you?' Thomas chuckled, and before Alice could protest, he spun the steering wheel so hard to starboard they caught the crest of a massive wallowing wave.

Rachel felt her stomach rise and then drop like a stone. *The Black Juke* punched its way through another huge wave, and even George let out a gasp as they dropped downwards into the deep trough and the cavernous hole in the hull of a shipwreck that had just rolled over to port.

'HOLD ONTO YOUR HATS,' Thomas shouted. 'I'M A LITTLE BIT OUT OF PRACTICE – BUT I THINK I CAN MAKE IT.'

Rachel's fingers pinched the car seat so hard they hurt.

The Black Juke shot through the hole of the stricken wooden ship.

From out of the blackness, all sorts of sunken junk brushed by them: seaweed petticoats rippled and danced; barnacle boots spun through the turbulent waters and scores of starfish bumped and tumbled off the windscreen – leaving a thick trail of luminous slime as they slid off.

Still holding onto the steering wheel with his right hand, Thomas adjusted his goggles with his left. 'NOW, HOLD ON TIGHT AND TAKE A DEEP BREATH,' he boomed. 'HERE COMES ANOTHER WAVE.'

Rachel's head throbbed and momentary her vision blurred.

Thomas dodged the tumbling wooden barrels and steered the car around floating spinning chests and listless rotting mannequins. With earth's gravity losing its fight against *The Black Juke's* impossible feat, the car raced around the hull of the spinning shipwreck and with a final burst of power, it shot out the side they had entered barely a minute ago.

The blazing sun blinded them as they resurfaced, so Thomas barely registered the dark something that lumbered over a rising wave, but he floored the accelerator and moved the car out of harm's way, but George bellowed, 'WATCH OUT – THERE'S SOMETHING ELSE OVER TO PORT!'

Rachel's eyes widened in shock as another something rose up out of the ocean depths. The shipwrecks spun around in the whirlpool, gaining ground and momentum as they closed in on *The Black Duke*.

Thomas flipped the red switch, flung the steering wheel to starboard, and they slipstreamed over the crest of an enormous plundering wave.

To their relief, the car's traction kicked in with a jarring jolt, and they rose and fell with the tumultuous surf towards the shoreline.

Rachel's heart and head pounded no more.

The ocean dwindled down to a heaving swell. *The Black Duke* made landfall and sped along the sand, weaving between the heaps of seaweed and bloodstained driftwood that now littered the beach.

* * *

The colour in Alice's face returned, and she said, 'Let's not do that again.'

Thomas let out a roar of laughter. '*But it's great to be back in the driving seat again,*' he cried jubilantly, but he reigned in his joy as he spotted the outline of an imposing fortress on the horizon. 'That's Bellingtons up ahead of us – we'll be there in no time.'

In the distance, Bellingtons' boarding school reached high into the sky. Built well back from the craggy cliff face, the fortress's four towers and matching heraldic flags seem to puncture the low-slung clouds.

Thomas put his racing car through its paces but slowed down as it rumbled along a rutted road that ended at Bellingtons' flying bridge.

Milling about in the muddy fortified ditch, a herd of shaggy Highland cows bolted as *The Black Duke* rolled across the bridge's wooden slats.

The Motte & Bailey Crown Court's courtyard paled in comparison to Bellingtons. Rachel couldn't tell where the courtyard ended, as trees and bushes covered most of the ground. Scores of trickling brooks meandered through the idyllic setting. They left the sea breeze by a weathered stone archway and parked *The Black Duke* in a boggy area reserved for staff.

'Well, at least we've arrived in one piece,' said Alice half-heartedly, removing her overcoat and woolly hat. 'Just smell that invigorating sea air,' she added dreamily and stifled the beginnings of a gaping yawn.

George appeared disappointed. 'I'd do that again and again, Thomas,' he grinned expectantly. 'That was the ride of my life.'

'I'll keep that in mind, George,' he told him and checked his watch. 'Um – believe it or not, we're actually running late, and it wouldn't do for our newest pupils to be late for their first appointment – and like Mr Pillings, Mrs Dandelion is a stickler for punctuality.'

'I think I'm going to have a little nose around,' said Rachel, dumping her overcoat and woolly hat into the passenger seat.

'I forgot to tell you about Mary Plodding,' Thomas said, wringing his hands agitatedly. 'She had a tough time coping with Jack's death, so her parents asked Mr Warbler if Bellingtons would take her into their care.'

'What do we say to her?' Rachel asked.

At first, Thomas just stared over her shoulder. 'If she wants to speak, I'm sure she will make the first move,' he said with a heavy sigh.

'We better get going,' said Alice. 'First impressions and all that.'

'See you later, Uncle Thomas,' Rachel said with a wave and followed the impeccably-dressed young schoolgirl over the lip of a stone bridge.

* * *

Rachel leant against the trunk of an old oak tree; she threw pebble after pebble into the still pond and thought if the black stone walls could talk, what tales they would tell about Bellington's historic and regal past.

Behind Bellingtons' black stone walls, you'll find an oasis of splendour and tranquillity, Rachel recalled, feeling quite pleased with herself, as she had remembered at least most of the school's prospectus that her parents had given her the other day at the breakfast table.

For the best part of half an hour, she had watched pupils and their families crossing the courtyard. They had all disappeared through a wide stone tunnel, and as the last remaining stragglers rushed through it, she heard the cacophony of excited children drifting over its high wall.

Brushing the dewy bits of grass off her dress, she stepped towards the long spindly bridge that spanned the largest pond, but she saw a rope ladder swinging in the blustery breeze. She hadn't climbed anything in months, so she decided to see where the rope ladder would take her. As she ascended the knurled oak tree, the frayed rope looked ready to snap, so she leapt onto the nearest branch and peered beyond the high wall.

The crowd swelled in front of the wooden stage.

Rachel's excellent eyesight couldn't see much of anything through the colourful bunting and plethora of white tents, but then, the dulcet tones from a young girl's voice distracted her.

With soft steps, she grabbed hold of the rope ladder and descended towards the girl's melodic singing voice as she began to sing a hymn.

On reaching the lowest branch, she recognised the girl as the one she had followed over the stone bridge. Her angelic voice soon ended, and she began humming quietly away to herself.

Her spotless black and white petticoat dress matched her white socks and black shoes and sandwiched between her back and the knobbly tree trunk, her shiny jet-black hair plunged down to her slender waist.

Drawn to the girl's alabaster hands, Rachel watched her attached a short length of the vine to the ends of a rectangular black card. In her lap, rested a badly scuffed black leather-bound book, its ragtag edges adorned with dull gold leaf. With her humming ended, she began to sing a lyrical rhyme, *'Doctor Foster went to Gloucester in a shower of rain. She stepped in a puddle, right up to her middle and was never seen –'*

SMACK!

Another clump of sticky reddish mud soared through the breezy air, splattering the front of the girl's pristine petticoat. In the bushes, cackling laughter rang out. The girl wiped the mud away and quickly thumbed through her book; eventually, she poised over a particular busy page and said in a bitter tone, *'Let's see how you lot like urushiol.'*

Rachel leant forward to get a better vantage point of the book's page. On the right, blobs of red wax held dry-pressed leaves prisoner, and in stark contrast, irregular lines of swish black writing adorned the left.

And as if by magic, a bit of white chalk mysteriously appeared in the girl's left hand, and she began scribbling furiously away on the card.

Peeling an almond-shaped leaflet from the page, she stuck it to the other side of the card with her saliva. With the two pieces of vine clasped firmly in her hands, she spun the card, uttering another rhyme and said, *'Sticks and stones might break my bones, but heartless words can harm you!'*

The girl dropped the card into her book with a deep sigh, but as she snapped the rusty clasp shut, a callous patronising voice bellowed, 'OH, SOPHRONIA – COME OUT – COME OUT – WHEREVER YOU ARE!'

Startled by the sudden loud voice, Rachel lost her footing, and with a shrill shriek, she fell off the branch and knocked the mud-splattered girl sideways – knocking her book into the dense bushes.

Rachel shook the cobwebs out of her head and shot to her feet.

The girl she had just knocked over followed suit and glared at the scowling schoolgirl who had strutted into the small clearing.

The tall ginger-headed schoolgirl quickly squealed over her shoulder, *'Hey, Hester, Abigail – come over here and take a gander at this.'*

Two pudgy schoolgirls came waddling into the clearing.

'Look, girls, Sophronia's made a friend,' said the ginger-headed girl venomously. 'I wonder how she's managed to do that.'

The other girls snorted, but the least dumpy one said cuttingly, 'I bet Sophronia's promised to buy her lunch to fatten her up.'

'Her black dress is hanging off her bones,' added the dumpiest girl with equal spite. 'Can't Mummy or Daddy afford to feed you anymore?'

Rachel felt the cruelty ooze out of every pore as their callous words left their chubby lips; however, the ginger-headed girl's words were full of malice and malevolence. Bullies were the same in every school, but this girl appeared to be in a league of her own.

Sophronia gave Rachel a sullen glance and stepped brazenly towards the ginger-headed girl. 'I suggest you keep that hooked nose of yours out of other peoples' business, Eleanor,' she said snidely. 'You're worse than your mother, Vivian – and that's saying something.'

'It's Miss Vivian Harlequin to the likes of you,' Eleanor snapped, her speckled freckles reddening with unfettered rage. 'Mother knows all about *your* family, Sophronia, so you better keep your big trap buttoned.'

'Hey, Eleanor – look what I found in the bushes,' said the dumpiest girl. 'It's pretty careless leaving a family heirloom around for just anyone to find,' she added mockingly, clutching Sophronia's book to her chest.

'Give me back my book right now,' snapped Sophronia.

'Hester, might I take a look at Sophronia's most treasured book?' asked Eleanor. 'I'm sure she wouldn't mind,' she added tauntingly.

Rachel had heard quite enough. 'I suggest you give Sophronia back her private property, Eleanor,' she said calmly, but her patience was running out with the bully who thought baiting someone was fair play.

'Oh, I think you'll find the law around Bellingtons is finders keepers,' Eleanor told Rachel and snatched the book from Hester. 'Now, I wonder what Gribble secrets lay behind this locked clasp – or should I just take a wild guess and throw this mouldy old book into the pond?'

'Let's take it to the armoury – and bust the lock,' offered Hester with giddy gleefulness. 'What do you think we should do with it, Abigail?'

'I've come up a bit short this month, so let's sell the heirloom back to Sophronia,' added Abigail. 'Oh my, I think she's actually going to cry.'

Sophronia snuffled again and wiped her nose with her white sleeve.

Rachel glowered at Eleanor and decided enough was enough.

'I think I'll take that book off your hands, Eleanor,' Rachel spat and wrenched Sophronia's book away from her grasp with lightning speed.

The schoolgirls' smug expressions vanished in an instant.

Rachel passed the book to Sophronia and gave Eleanor a triumphant smirk. Incense by her embarrassment in front of her friends, Eleanor rushed furiously over towards Sophronia, but Rachel barred her way with a fierce scowl. Sophronia jammed the book into her overstuffed black satchel and mouthed a gracious warm '*thank you*' back at Rachel.

Eleanor seethed. 'You've got five seconds to give that book back to me,' she told Sophronia scathingly. '1... 2... 3 -'

'- If I were you, Eleanor, I'd button that fat lip,' interrupted Rachel scornfully. 'You might cut yourself on that sharp tongue of yours -'

Rachel recoiled but stayed upright.

Eleanor's bony knuckles pulled quite a punch, but she had taken far worse punches at Plums. Her right cheek smarted, but she gave nothing away as she rubbed it and gave Eleanor a brittle grin of contempt as if her cowardly punch hadn't hurt at all.

'N-now you've gone and done it,' Sophronia told Eleanor, who tried and failed to hide her discomfort as she rubbed her right hand. 'As Prefect, I have to report any assaults on members of staff or pupils.'

Through her pain, Eleanor let out a derisive laugh. 'She's no pupil - look, she's not even wearing a uniform,' she snapped. 'No wonder you two are friends - she's probably an orphan just like you, Sophronia -'

Eleanor suddenly cried out and fell to her knees. Clutching at her legs, she keeled over in burning agony. Hester and Abigail came to her aid with sheer panic etched upon their flaccid faces.

'ARGHHHHH!' Eleanor cried out again.

'What's wrong, Eleanor?' squeaked Abigail desperately.

'*It's my legs - it's my legs - they're burning!*' she screamed tearfully.

'WHAT'S GOING ON HERE?' demanded a stern voice from behind the oak tree. 'WHY AREN'T YOU GIRLS AT THE -'

Rachel's eyes widened as she stared at the schoolgirl who had come into the clearing: Mary Plodding returned her surprised face.

Hester's panicked voice brought them down to earth. 'Miss Plodding - Eleanor's in pain - it's something to do with her legs,' she squealed.

Mary gave Rachel a nod of recognition and rushed to Eleanor's side, whose pale legs began to turn a nasty reddish colour: foul pockets of weeping blisters spread down from her knobbly knees to her pale ankles.

Rachel's nose wrinkled in disgust as custard-coloured liquid oozed out of Eleanor's blisters that smelt like rotten eggs and boiled cabbage.

'Hester, Abigail - help me get her up,' Mary said with authority.

The girls each took an arm. Mary grabbed Eleanor's waist and did her best to calm her down as she began to blubber uncontrollably.

'I'm taking Eleanor to Matron,' Mary told Abigail uncomfortably. 'Run ahead and tell her I'm coming with a patient. Hester, go and tell Mrs Dandelion where I'm going - she should be on stage by now.'

Abigail and Hester ran as fast as their flabby legs could manage.

'Um, Miss Plodding, I think Eleanor's been in the old Greenhouses,' hinted Sophronia. 'She must have brushed up against some *Poison Ivy*.'

'Thank you, Sophronia – I'll tell Matron,' Mary replied, catching her breath. 'It's nice seeing you again, Rachel – but I must dash...'

With a grimace, Mary dragged Eleanor over the spindly bridge.

With a heavy heart, Rachel watched them disappear.

'So, you're Professor Shire's niece?' Sophronia asked Rachel.

'Rachel Cook to be exact. Thomas is my mum's brother,' she replied.

'Sophronia Gribble at your service,' she announced with a smile and shook Rachel's hand. 'I hear the grapevine is ripe with rumours about its pupils and staff moving to Bellingtons – do you know if they're true?'

Rachel threw caution to the wind. 'Yes, it's all true,' she replied. 'I'm afraid Bellingtons is going to get very crowded by the end of the week.'

Over the imposing high wall, booming speakers crackled. 'TESTING – TESTING – 1... 2... 3... 4...' bellowed the gravel-voiced woman.

'That was Mrs Rose Dandelion, your headmistress,' said Sophronia glumly. 'Sounds like our sports day is about to begin. C'mon, Rachel, we had better head over there, as I don't want to spend another cold night in detention. Oh, I heard your uncle will be making a guest appearance.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Orphan's Marble

Fabricated from beer barrels, planks of wood and just plain hard graft, Rachel and Sophronia weaved their way to the front of the stage.

Taking centre stage, Mrs Rose Dandelion waited for the crowd to calm down. Running up the steps and onto the stage, Mary caught her breath and stood to Rose's right, and to her left, stood a young woman with blond hair tied up into a tight bun; she looked very nervous and brushed the invisible creases out of her striped hospital nursing dress.

Rose coughed, and the crowd fell silent. She tapped her microphone and cleared her throat. 'May I welcome you all to Bellingtons' autumnal sports day,' she said and held her arms out wide and flapped her hands so fast it was if she wanted to take off. The crowd whooped and cheered back at her enthusiastic welcome. 'Our sports day will not have the full complement of activities which we enjoyed this summer. However, the challenges you'll face today will be tougher than ever.'

'I don't like the sound of that,' Sophronia whispered in Rachel's ear. *'A couple of pupils are still recovering from last summer's Egg and Spoon race.'*

Rose continued. 'Regrettably, the teachers' race has been cancelled, as Matron Crowling is busy dealing with a serious medical emergency. I must remind pupils that the old Greenhouses are *still* off-limits. We have, however, Sister Wiggly, who's recently joined our medical staff from Gravelings, therefore, I would be grateful if pupils would refrain from seriously injuring themselves this afternoon, as it's Peggy's first day on the job, and we wouldn't want to give her the wrong impression that Bellingtons' sports day is the slightest bit dangerous.'

Peggy stepped forward and gave the crowd a timid wave as they sounded out their approval, but she quickly stepped out of the limelight.

'I would also like to thank Mary Plodding here for her tireless energy in helping myself and the other members of staff,' said Rose with high praise. 'I don't know what I'd do without her.'

The crowd clapped, and Mary gave them a subtle smile in return.

A veil of sadness fell across Rose's face. 'I speak with a heavy heart with the news that our Head Boy and Girl have stepped down from their school duties,' she told the hushed crowd and paused for thought.

'They stepped down all right,' muttered an elderly woman to Rachel's right. *'They both fell in love and eloped.'*

'Their contribution to Bellingtons was incalculable,' continued Rose, almost in tears. 'The school governors have recently appointed a new

Head Boy and Girl, so would you please put your hands together and give Alice Winterbright and George Browning a warm welcome to the stage.'

Rachel cheered with the rest of the crowd; her hands went sky high as George and Alice walked onto the stage with big grins. Rose clapped, but Rachel felt her face hid an uncertainty as she shook their hands.

Rose stepped towards the flowery tape and motioned the crowd for silence. 'It is almost eleven years since Bellingtons opened its doors to those children whose families needed a school who understood their problems,' she told them tenaciously. 'It is a testament to the man that made this school possible, and I'd like you to make him feel as welcome as he did to all those pupils he wanted to help so long ago. So, please give our beloved benefactor, Professor Thomas Shire, a very warm welcome.'

With his familiar trilby hat perched on top of his head, Thomas burst onto the stage with his overcoat billowing in the breeze.

Rachel went deaf as the crowd sounded out their approval once more.

Peggy came nimbly out of the shadows and gave Thomas a bouquet of flowers, which he humbly accepted and gave her a peck on the cheek.

Pupils giggled as she blushed from embarrassment.

Thomas handed the flowers to Mary in exchange for a pair of scissors. Brimming with overconfidence, he strutted up to the microphone; with his hands on his hips, he waited patiently for the crowd to calm down.

(Rachel had to hand it to Ian, as even she was convinced that Thomas Shire stood before her with an oversized pair of scissors in his hands.)

'It is a privilege and an honour to stand before you today,' Thomas regaled to the crowd that seem to hang on his every word. 'I am gratified that Bellingtons is a beacon – dare I say a warning – to other schools that no child should be lost to education.

Bellingtons demand its pupils step up and overcome the diverse challenges laid down in its curriculum. Today's sporting challenges are an important part of that curriculum. We will test your resolve as well as your strengths and weaknesses, and make no mistake – a weakness is just a strength waiting in the wings.'

As the crowd digested Thomas' speech, Rose's eyes welled up with emotion, and she burst into applause. The crowd joined in, and someone shouted, 'THREE CHEERS FOR PROFESSOR SHIRE!'

Thomas bowed to the crowd, and as they cheered him, he cut the tape with his scissors and bellowed, 'BELLINGTONS' SPORTS DAY IS NOW OFFICIALLY OPEN – AND THE BEST OF LUCK TO ALL OF YOU.'

Rachel stared longingly at the chalkboard sign, and her dry tongue licked her parched lips in anticipation. With the offer of free drinks, she ignored Sophronia's protestations and dragged her hastily inside the white tent. The opening ceremony had made her thirsty, and she hadn't clapped and cheered so much since Judy Silverback made Head Girl at Plums.

Sophronia introduced Rachel to Pauline Marsh; Rachel knew her sister Jenny, who still went to Plums. Pauline gave them the overly bright drinks list to peruse and went to serve her next customer:

Bellingtons' Drinks Menu

Welcome to our new autumn menu. We pride ourselves on sourcing local plants. Please note that if you were unfortunate enough to have even the slightest allergic reaction to any of our organic drinks, then would you please inform Matron Crowling at your earliest convenience.

Caution: all drink consumption taken at your own risk

Today's Special

Gimballed Jellyfish Juice with lashings of Smoked Seaweed

Purified Bellingtons' Tap Water

Charred Pumpkin Rinds in Ginger Ale

Crushed Burdock Root in Seasoned Nettle Tea

Dandelion Potpourri Scattered in Pineapple Juice

Organic Sprout Puree infused with Starfish Fingers

Please note that each drink comes with an edible paper doily

Donations always welcome

'Pauline's got an unusual selection of drinks to choose from,' Rachel told Sophronia as the insides of her leathery mouth waited patiently for her to decide. 'Maybe I should take a wild guess,' she added blithely.

'Well, that would be taking your life in your hands,' said Sophronia surreptitiously, lowering her voice so Pauline couldn't hear her. 'Pauline likes to experiment with her drinks – and we're her gullible guinea pigs.'

'Oh, there you are,' said a worried voice by the doorway.

Rachel peered over the top of the drink's menu.

George rushed into the tent with Alice following closely behind. With a furtive glance, George told Alice, 'That was a close call – but I think we've managed to lose them.'

'Who are you hiding from?' asked Rachel, a little perturbed.

Alice raised her eyebrows. 'Well, apparently George has a fan club of impressionable young schoolgirls,' she told Rachel with an ill-tempered huff. 'Bellingtons' schoolgirls are smitten with their new Head Boy – and I think his newfound fame has a lot to do with it.'

Rachel noticed Sophronia staring at the pair of them. 'Oh, where are my manners,' she grinned wildly. 'Sophronia – I'd like you to meet my friends, George and Alice – and don't be shy, they really are quite normal when you get to know them.'

With a firm handshake, Sophronia said, 'I've just been made Prefect – so it looks like I report to you two now.'

'I'm new to all this stuff,' George informed her, 'so any tips about being Head Boy would be greatly appreciated.'

Just don't fall in love, Rachel thought.

'I'll make you up a list, George,' Sophronia chuckled.

'Alice told me she was Gravelings' Head Girl, so she's had plenty of experience bossing pupils about,' George quipped, but Alice ignored him.

Pauline rushed up to them with a pen and notepad. 'Now, are we ready to order?' she puffed, catching her breath.

'I'll take a Ginger Ale without the Charred Pumpkin Rinds,' said Sophronia firmly. 'I can still taste those pumpkin rinds from last week, and it feels like I'm burping up lumps of coal.'

Rachel gave the drinks menu to Alice, who appeared surprised as she handed the menu into George's eager hands.

'I'll take some Purified Bellingtons' Tap Water,' Rachel insisted, much to Pauline's disappointment.

Alice stared daggers at Pauline. 'So, I see you're Captain Eddie's secret supplier of exotic squashes?' she told her straight.

Pauline's face flushed. 'Er, yes – but please don't tell Mrs Dandelion,' she trembled with eyes welling up with worry. 'Eddie pays me a pittance, and we have to count the pennies since my father lost his job at the bank.'

'Mum's the word,' replied Alice with a reassuring smile.

The tent flaps moved aside. George flung himself down behind Alice, but he breathed a sigh of relief as Sister Wiggly came inside, pushing a man in a creaky squeaky wheelchair.

'OK, Mr Clarke, we need you out of this chair,' Peggy told the elderly gentleman, grabbed his arm and slowly pulled him out of his wheelchair. 'This way – just a little bit further – you can do it,' she added cajolingly.

Sophronia rushed over and gently took his other arm. 'Where's Mr Clarke sitting,' she asked Peggy.

Pauline pushed a couple of tables to make space and patted a chair. 'Mr Clarke can sit down here. Now, I'll go and get his treatment,' she said hurriedly and bustled out of the tent at full speed.

Rachel felt sorry for Mr Clarke, who looked as if he was about to peg out. His eyes were bloodshot, and translucent mucus seeped out of his blackened eyelids. Rough pieces of linen dangled down from his nostrils, and his ruddy bulbous nose looked ready to explode. Nasty scratches covered most of his face (and it looked as if he'd picked a fight with a bramble bush). However, what really caught her eye were his pointy ears and the copious amounts of fine black hairs that grew out of them.

With a sweaty brow, Pauline pushed the trolley into the tent. 'I've marinade the bees' nest overnight just like you told me,' she told Peggy.

'Now, you're absolutely sure you put them outside at twilight?' Peggy replied. 'Mr Grubbins was most adamant about the time.'

(Rachel's ears twitched. *Was this the same Grubbins etched on the crystal her granny had given to Bill Bumble as a wedding present*, she thought.)

'I used two alarms just to make sure,' said Pauline unequivocally.

'Now, if I understand his condition correctly, Mrs Dandelion said it's Mr Grubbins' fault that Mr Clarke caught the flu in the first place,' griped Peggy exasperatedly. 'Something about his mangy, flea-ridden, bad-tempered, ungrateful feline companion – or words to that effect.'

'Mr Grubbins only took the cat in because nobody wanted the fiery kitten, and it was going to be put down,' Pauline told her with a heavy heart. 'You know he lives in the Inklings – and even he's surprised his tomcat managed to roamed *that* far away from home.'

'What's done is done. I only hope Mr Grubbins' medicine can help poor Mr Clarke here,' Peggy postulated, patting his sagging shoulder. 'Mind you, I've never heard of anyone contracting cat flu before!'

Mr Clarke suddenly scrunched up his nose – and let out a raging sneeze. His soggy linen plugholes flew out of his nostrils at speed, spinning through the air, dragging a trail of greenish snot with them; however, they finally splattered on something soft – much to the horror of George and Alice's congealed faces.

Rachel ducked again as Brian sneezed up another storm of snot.

Caught in the firing line once more, the tightly packed wooden tables and chairs dripped with smelly green goo. Brian looked quite relieved as his nostrils breathed in the aroma from Pauline's sickly-sweet potion.

* * *

Rachel took another swig from Pauline's bottled water and sucked in the saltiness of the onshore breeze. In a mad panic, Peggy and Pauline had ushered Rachel and Sophronia outside with the rest of the customers. Quarantined until further notice, George and Alice had to stay inside the tent until Peggy could find a way to inoculate them. Pauline's stocky chalkboard sign now barred the tent's main entrance and said:

MEDICAL EMERGENCY: ABSOLUTELY NO ADMITTANCE!

Rachel nibbled on her edible doily and took in the sports day hullabaloo. Sophronia, however, ignored the nattering noises of parents and their bellowing broods as she read the sports day's itinerary.

It hadn't taken long for Rachel to feel the pangs of boredom creeping through her bones 'Anything of interest in there?' she asked Sophronia.

'Well, if you want to be humiliated or your bones crushed to a pulp, there's plenty to choose from,' she replied mawkishly.

'Let me take a look,' Rachel asked.

Sophronia's eyes oozed caution as she handed over the dog-eared itinerary. 'D'you know what – I really fancy something cold right now,' she said longingly. 'Rosy and Ronny Bramble have been rushed off their feet all morning – and it looks like their lollies will sell out soon.'

Rachel gave the Bramble's stall a cursory look. With the magnetic letters falling off in the rising heat, their homemade metal sign said:

WILE SOCKS LAST, BY ONE LOLIPOP AND GET ONE FEE

'OK, I'll take anything that doesn't have raspberries in it,' she told her.

Sophronia grinned and sped towards the back of the queue, narrowly avoiding bumping into Hester and Abigail, who wore nasty, snarling faces beneath their protective headgear. Chipped mouth guards, battered shin and wrist guards, grass-stained elbow pads, rugby boots with dented hockey sticks completed the girls' menacing appearance.

Rachel began working her way down the itinerary, but about halfway down the list, a slight shadow fell across her shoes. Looking lost, a petite young girl, in an oversized school uniform, smiled shyly up at her.

The girl's dewy brown eyes took on a downtrodden demeanour as she said in a sugary-sweet voice, *'I'm sorry to disturb you – but I can't seem to find anyone who'll play a game of marbles with me.'*

Rachel felt sorry for the girl who seemed far too young to be going to Bellingtons. 'Um, shouldn't you be getting back to your parents?' she asked her. 'They're probably getting worried wondering where you are.'

Rachel's eyes continued to dart here, there and everywhere as she sought anyone who appeared to be missing their wandering offspring.

'My parents aren't worried about me anymore because they're dead – and now I'm an orphan,' she sniffed, her eyes welling up. 'My two sisters are orphans as well. We're all orphans, and nobody wants to play marbles with us,' she added, dropped her marble and burst into tears.

Rachel bent down and snatched up her marble. 'Don't cry – I'll come and play with you and your sisters,' she said to the girl, who perked up no end as she used a grubby white handkerchief to dry her moist eyes.

'D'you have a friend who could come and play, too?' the girl added, her slim hands clasped in hope. 'That would make us orphans so happy.'

'Why, yes – she's just getting me a lollipop –' Rachel began, but the girl forced a crinkled sheet of paper and well-chewed pen into her hand.

'If you wouldn't mind – but would you sign my paper with both your names,' the girl asked. 'It will show my sisters that someone really cares about us orphans,' she added with pitiful eyes and puffy flushed cheeks.

Rachel smiled and signed her form.

The girl suddenly snatched the paper and pen from out of her hands and, without another word, she sped along the footpath, leaving her iridescent marble behind and disappeared into the throng of the crowd.

'Hiya, Rachel,' said a familiar voice from over her shoulder.

Still bemused by the orphan's swift departure, she returned Stewart's smile as Alfred, William and Sophronia followed closely behind.

'Rachel, I do believe these three boys are friends of yours?' Sophronia chuckled, holding out a strangely shaped lollipop. 'Sorry, but these were the only ones they had left – it's their new range of Halloween lollies.'

'What are you lot doing here?' Rachel asked, eyeing the wobbly grey lollipop with suspicion as she grabbed its spine-like wooden stick.

'We always come to Bellingtons' sports day,' Stewart told her, licking his fang-shaped lollipop, 'even if we do have to bunk off French.'

'We wouldn't miss it for the world,' added Alfred smiling, sucking on his mouldy toenail lollipop that made Rachel's nose turn up in disgust.

'But what we've really come to see is the famed Marbles match,' said William gleefully. 'Bellingtons' girls are the roughest and toughest in the country,' he added approvingly and bit into his squelchy eyeball lollipop.

Rachel's brain lollipop melted as she took in William's dire news. 'M-Marbles m-match you say,' she stuttered, doing her utmost to ignore the pangs of self-doubt that churned in the pit of her stomach.

'Only the fearless or reckless may enter the competition,' Sophronia informed her, 'so sometimes the opposing team get roped in under false pretences – but of course, only an idiot would sign up for that –'

'Ah, there you two are!' a high-pitched voice uttered with much jollity.

Rachel watched a sprightly middle-aged woman as she strode down the footpath with two hockey sticks over her broad shoulders and a green long-sleeved jumper tied loosely around her thick neck.

'Um – hullo, Miss Jenkins,' replied Sophronia suspiciously.

Rachel read her red name badge as she drew up to them. Miss Sue Jenkins, Head of Games, had won an outstanding number of awards and merits, and her cluttered green t-shirt made sure you knew it.

With her muscular, tanned legs sticking out of her tartan skirt, Sue plunged the hockey sticks into the sandy ground. 'Well, I never thought I'd see the day,' she said confidently and handed Rachel and Sophronia each a sturdy hockey stick. 'Miss Gribble and Professor Shire's niece on my hockey pitch – now, that's going into the history books.'

'Excuse me, Miss Jenkins... um... there must be some mistake,' Sophronia told her with growing concern.

'Oh, there's no mistake,' she said buoyantly. 'Both your names are on the Marbles list along with... ah, yes – Miss Tomkins and Miss Jones will be joining you on your team today,' she added brightly and folded the crinkled paper in half, giving them an encouraging but rueful smile.

'But whose writing is that?' Sophronia demanded.

'Er, that – that will be mine,' replied Rachel hesitantly.

'Excellent – so that's all settled,' spouted Sue. 'C'mon, girls – follow me. You're not kitted out, and the game starts in thirty minutes.'

Rachel didn't dare stare at Sophronia's scowling face as they followed Sue along the footpath, but as they left the boys' stunned faces behind, she heard William say, '*This is going to be one hell of a match.*'

* * *

'Rachel, what on earth were you thinking?' Sophronia demanded over the changing room's partition. 'You know we're all going to die!'

'Sorry, but I didn't know that Bellingtons' Marbles would require me writing a will,' she snapped back with a disagreeable rebuff.

'You'd think your uncle would have least told you about the game of Marbles,' said Sophronia crossly, joining her at the centre of the room.

Rachel ignored the whiff of something unpleasant wafting up from her scruffy black rugby boots. 'Well, he didn't tell me, OK,' she told her irritably, trying not to lose her temper as she kept tying her long laces into knots, still peeved her undercover uncle hadn't mentioned the game of Marbles could probably put you or your team six feet underground!

A knock at the door ended their bickering. '*You girls ready?*' Sue asked.

'Yes, Miss Jenkins – just give us a moment,' replied Sophronia.

Rachel flung open the stubborn door, gave Sophronia a worried look and asked her timidly, 'Do you know how to play Bellingtons' Marbles?'

'Miss Jenkins will explain the rules before the match,' she replied glumly. 'C'mon, Rachel – we better not keep her or the crowd waiting.'

* * *

Sophronia introduced Fiona Tomkins and Olivia Jones to Rachel. The two girls were the same age as Rachel, but they were a good two inches taller.

The young orphan's clever ruse had fooled them as well, so Rachel didn't feel too bad about being taken in.

Sue told them to pick a goalkeeper, defender, midfielder and attacker before they went out onto the pitch. Sophronia insisted on being the goalkeeper, and she wouldn't have it any other way. Fiona chose the position of defender, and Olivia snapped up the position of midfielder, leaving Rachel with the unenviable position of the attacker.

'Right, it's almost time, girls,' said Sue with a little bit too much enthusiasm. 'I'm going out onto the pitch and introduce the crowd to the game. I've never seen so many people come and watch a game of Marbles before. Now, remember, girls, on the pitch, I'm to be addressed as the umpire,' she added with a winning smile and left through a side gate.

Rachel joined the other girls and peered out at the immense crowd.

The crowd let out a roar of jubilation as Sue entered the centre circle.

Sue's megaphone crackled. 'I'd like to welcome you all to the game of Bellingtons' Marbles,' she said with overzealous glee, and the crowd roared their approval. 'The rules of the game are simple. Each team of

four has one marble in their cherry pit. Any member of the team can attempt to knock the marble away from their opponents' cherry pit; however, it's the attacker's job to put the white ball into the cherry pit.

The team that scores three times wins the game of Marbles.

However, there is one rule that will end the game immediately.

Knock your opponents' marble out of play, and the game ends in a draw. Please note, unlike hockey, players must wear protective clothing at all times. We have Sister Wiggly waiting in the wings to take any player to the hospital wing, but let's hope it doesn't come to that.'

Laughter and riotous banter rippled through the crowd.

Sue checked her wristwatch. 'OK, it's almost time to kick off – so let's meet the teams,' she added booming and blew her whistle.

Two gates opened, and eight girls walked out into the pitch with their hockey sticks over their shoulders. The odour of onions, fried sausages and burgers drifted by their noses, and Rachel's stomach wasn't the only one that rumbled in protest as the players sniffed the delicious smells.

As each team drew up to Sue, Rachel recognised Hester and Abigail's flabby faces beneath their oversized helmets; however, the thundering footsteps behind them belonged to two girls – each the size of a barn.

Rachel gulped as the two ginormous girls swung their hockey sticks like swords, and even Sue had to duck and dive to one side as they came to a thudding stop, almost beheading the umpire's bushy head. The girls had grown even wider since the last time she'd seen them fighting Alice.

'Those are Hester's sisters, Binny and Bunty Miller,' Sophronia told Rachel. 'Binny's the oldest, fattest and definitely the meanest!'

'PLACES EVERYONE,' bellowed Sue.

With her head slung low, Sophronia traipsed over towards her cherry pit, and Binny took slow bone-crushing steps towards her own. Abigail, Olivia and Fiona put their game faces on and took their places.

Hester and Rachel glared at one another as Sue spun around and shouted into the stands, 'PREPARE TO RELEASE THE MARBLES.'

The crowd applauded so loudly it felt and sounded like a thunderclap.

Rachel watched Bobby Growler huff and puff behind his hot dog van, which had parked far too close to the edge of the gravelled sideline with its other half sinking into the squishy pitch. In between two big billowing balloons, he struggled to insert the vacuum hose into the red one, but he finally gave Sue a wide grin and gave her the thumbs up.

Sue produced a coin. 'Heads or tails?' she asked the attackers.

'Our team always chooses heads,' Hester grinned.

'That's fine by me,' retorted Rachel magnanimously.

Sue flipped the coin. 'Heads it is,' she announced.

'We'll take the red marble,' said Hester triumphantly, but she leaned in towards Rachel. '*Yellow suits your team as it's full of cowardly custards,*' she added with a cruel cackle and a sinister smile.

Sue pointed over at Binny. Bobby beamed and flipped the switch on the side of his chugging pump that belched out a greasy looking fog. With a whooshing sound, the red balloon shot through the air with a boom.

Binny staggered two steps forwards and with her tree-stump arms caught the marble, spun around and threw it into her cherry pit.

The crowd went crazy.

Binny threw her hands over her head and clasped them together in triumph as if she had actually won the game of Marbles.

Bobby inserted the vacuum tube into the yellow marble and flipped the switch. Like a shooting sun, the marble arced through the air.

At first, Sophronia stood her ground, but as the marble bore down on her, she hesitated and leapt back, and at that moment, a sudden gust of wind brought the marble down with a wobble, and it bounced hard and hit her full on. The crowd laughed as she rolled with the marble right into the hockey net, and somebody yelled, '*Look, she's scored an own goal.*'

With egg on her face, Sophronia rolled the marble out of the net and into the cherry pit. Hester sniggered so much her mouth guard fell out.

Sue held the white ball at arm's length. 'All right, girls – this is it – let the best team win,' she said and blew her shrilling whistle.

As the ball plummeted towards the ground, Rachel thought about her vain attempts at mastering the skill of the hockey stick at Plums.

Hester dived straight in and flipped the ball back towards Abigail.

Rachel didn't think but acted, speeding towards Abigail, who hadn't expected her opponent to come at her so fast.

Rachel slammed the ball away from her, and it flew down the pitch.

Taken by surprise, Olivia fumbled but caught the ball; she dribbled it across the pitch and shouted at Rachel, '**ATTACK THEIR MARBLE.**'

Rachel sped down the sideline, but Bunty swung her stick to block her, but with skill on her side, she managed to dodge her and barrelled towards Binny, who hadn't flinch an inch as she raised her stick.

'**ATTACK,**' the crowd bellowed repeatedly.

At the very last second, Rachel crouched down and threw her weight forward, tucked herself into a tight ball and passed right under Binny's skirt and between her stumpy tree-like legs. Rachel emerged unscathed and launched herself at their red marble, and the crowd held their breath.

The marble slowly rolled out of the pit.

Olivia ploughed down the pitch, and with expert ability, she ran rings around Abigail, who had a childish temper tantrum as she fell short.

Hester thundered towards Olivia, but Fiona blocked her way with an inspired tackle that knocked Hester's stick out of her hands, and she lost her balance and crumpled to the ground under her enormous weight.

The crowd cheered Olivia onwards.

Rachel stood transfixed as Binny came at her, but a whacking sound made Binny spin on the spot, and she brought the full force of her stick around and smashed the ball back down the pitch, which sent Olivia diving for cover as the ball almost grazed her head. Without opposition, Rachel watched helplessly as Abigail managed to land the ball.

Hester sped after Abigail with a face full of festering fury.

Squaring up to Binny's solid stature and rage, Rachel had completely misjudged her brilliant pass, and cursed her utter incompetence, but she found her true form and hammered down the pitch towards Abigail and Hester, sidestepping Binny and Bunty as they tried to bring her down.

Sophronia paced nervously back and forth like a caged animal.

Hester sped towards Abigail at breakneck speed, but Rachel cut across the pitch hoping to intercept the pair of them before –

Hester barged Abigail out of the way and took the ball with her. With Abigail reeling from her teammate's surprise tackle, Rachel intercepted Hester and brought her stick down to hook the ball out of her reach –

Rachel felt a wall of wrath hit her as Hester's stick slammed into her chest. Sue's whistle screamed out in protest. The crowd shot out of their seats and chanted, 'FOUL, FOUL, FOUL...'

Rachel fell to the pitch in a messy pile. With her eyes welling up from the excruciating pain, she struggled to catch her rasping breath.

Someone shouted, 'GET SISTER WIGGLY – NOW!'

'Rachel – are you all right?' Sophronia screamed, kneeling beside her. 'Sister Wiggly's on her way, Rachel – just hold on.'

Rachel grimaced, but through her pain, she heard Abigail's furious voice, saying, '*Hester, what's wrong with you? I had the ball – I had the ball...*'

Rachel felt soft fingers prodding her ribs. 'Now listen to me, Rachel,' said Peggy breathlessly, grabbing something out of her medical kit. 'I'm going to place a patch on your ribs – but it's going to sting quite a bit.'

'Are you sure that thing's safe?' asked Sophronia hotly, who couldn't take her eyes off the odd patch. 'What are those deadly-looking spines?'

'They're bee stings,' Peggy retorted, her bedside manner all but gone.

'How's she doing?' Sue asked, looking down at Rachel's ashen face.

'Rachel will be up in no time –' Peggy began, but her patient let out a searing scream as the patch stung home.

Rachel blinked. Her pain throbbed for a moment and was gone the next. 'The pain's completely gone,' she told Peggy incredulously.

'Right – let's get you onto your feet,' said Peggy.

Peggy and Sue helped her up, and the crowd cheered.

Sophronia glared at Sue. 'Hester needs a red card,' she said bitterly.

'I'm sure she didn't mean to hit me,' Rachel told Sue pleadingly.

Sophronia, Olivia and Fiona looked utterly stunned.

'Y-you c-can't be serious?' Sophronia spluttered.

'We all make mistakes,' Rachel told Sue convincingly. 'I think Hester just got carried away. Maybe she needs a timeout – might I suggest a yellow card,' she added slyly and gave her teammates a knowing wink.

Sue held her yellow card up and pointed at Hester. The crowd wasn't the least bit happy and booed the umpire.

'Let me know if the pain returns,' Peggy told Rachel and followed the fuming Hester off the pitch, who threw her hockey stick at a passing cat.

Olivia and Fiona glowered at Rachel.

'What's going on?' Fiona demanded.

'Hester needs to be banned for life for that foul,' Olivia snarled.

'I think Rachel has a plan,' Sophronia told them.

Rachel gathered them around her. 'Look, we're never going to beat them,' she told them reluctantly. 'All we can hope for is a draw, and as Hester's out of the match for five minutes, that's evened the odds. Now, they think I'm injured, so I'll play them and act like I'm lame.'

'But we need to get their marble off the pitch,' Olivia hissed.

'It would take an army to get Binny away from her marble – unless you've a rump of steak to tempt her away,' sighed Sophronia morosely.

'Our team's weakness is skill – but our team's strength is waiting in the wings,' Rachel told them and whispered in Sophronia's ear.

Sophronia giggled. 'You know, it's so crazy – it just might work,' she grinned, 'and if it works – she won't know what hit her.'

'What's your little secret?' Fiona asked Rachel, slightly irked.

'It's best you don't know,' she replied. 'Everyone one of you is going to be busy keeping the ball away from our cherry pit.'

* * *

'PLACES EVERYONE,' Sue bellowed.

Rachel reigned in her nerves as she faked a limp towards the umpire.

Sue held the battered ball at arm's length. 'All right, girls – no more injuries, please,' she told them, blew her whistle and let the ball drop.

Rachel whacked her stick at the ball so fast it left Abigail reeling as it flew over Bunty's head. Sophronia shoved their yellow marble towards the backboard. With grim determination, Rachel charged down the pitch, throwing her helmet and body protection aside. Sophronia gave her the thumbs up and held the yellow marble perfectly still.

Rachel mustered all her strength and took to her heels, running at full speed towards their marble and dived headfirst into its airway that resembled a wrinkly bellybutton. With a sudden rush of air and a popping noise, she cartwheeled up against the insides of the marble, falling flat onto her back with a deep groan as her ribs smarted.

Sophronia thumped the marble's outer skin. 'RACHEL – WE HAVE THE BALL – LET'S GO,' she shouted wildly.

Rachel got to her feet, and like a hamster on a wheel, she ran full pelt inside the marble. The crowd went wild, and with their hands held high, they screamed out their approval of the unusual change of play.

Sue's whistle fell out of her lips and looked on in stunned awe.

'They're going for a draw – they're going for a draw,' Hester screamed from the sideline. *'Get her you nitwits.'*

Rachel zigzagged across the pitch, as she hadn't grasped how hard it would be running across the marble's thick rubbery skin.

But Bunty's heavy legs couldn't match her blazing speed, and Rachel breezed past her with ease, but Binny roared and clenched her fists into ham-sized balls as she charged towards the yellow marble.

With a burst of nervous energy, Rachel charged right back at her.

Binny pulled her arm back and threw a hefty punch; her fist sunk deep into the marble's skin, almost scalping Rachel's unprotected head, but she let out a startled yell of pain, as her fist had rebounded and hit her squarely in the face. The yellow marble bounced back down the pitch.

Rachel tumbled head over heels and fell flat on her face. As she got back onto her feet, she realised time wasn't on her side, and she found it hard to breathe as she had little oxygen left. Her desperate plan seemed foolhardy and risky, but she prayed it would be worth the humiliation if it backfired on her and her teammates.

A scream of frustration sliced through the air: Bunty thundered down the pitch with a terrible scowl plastered across her enraged face.

Rachel gritted her teeth, put her plan into action and ran up the wall, and as she picked up speed, the marble looked like a tipsy spinning top.

Her expert footwork gained experience and ground, and she quickly pressed home her advantage, grinning as Bunty faltered and fell to the ground as the marble glided around her with the grace of a ballerina.

With her air almost exhausted, Rachel pushed herself even harder and hurtled towards Growler's hot dog van.

Rolling herself into a ball, Rachel threw her hands over her head. Her ribs took a pounding as the marble slammed into the side of the van.

The van toppled backwards but managed to stay upright, and if the sun had a twin, the marble sailed through the air at speed, landing hard against the backboard and rebounded just as fast.

Rachel heard a loud popping noise and then the shrilling sound of a distant whistle. As she sweated and struggled to breathe, vague shadowy figures scuttled before her eyes, and she heard a distinct ripping sound.

Her blurry dry eyes focused on the animated shadows above her.

Sophronia fell to the ground beside her, grabbed her arm and said ecstatically, *'You did it, Rachel – you did it – your plan actually worked.'*

'Now easy does it,' said Sue, who took her other arm. They pulled her up and onto her wobbly feet and held on to her as she started to sway. *'Now then, Rachel – just take a few deep breaths and you should be OK.'*

The sound of baying laughter reverberated around the hockey pitch.

The crowd were beside themselves, pointing at the red marble that rolled back and forth on the gravelled path behind Growler's hot dog van.

Rachel's audacious plan had worked, but it had an unexpected side effect: Binny's frustrated face protruded through the red marble's inner skin as she scratched desperately to escape her rubbery prison.

'I s'ppose we'd better get Binny out of her marble before her air runs out,' said Sue with a devilish smirk. *'Oh, and congratulations, Miss Cook – your unusual gameplay paid off,'* she added with adulation.

Rachel gave Sophronia, Olivia and Fiona a winning smile. *'I couldn't have done it without my teammates,'* she told her outright and sniffed the breezy, fresh air. *'Well, I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm absolutely famished – so who's up for a hot dog with all the trimmings?'*

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

A Most Angry Bird

Fiona swallowed the vestiges of her hot dog and wiped the mustard and ketchup off her fingers with a white crumpled serviette. 'Considering you bashed the side of his van, smashed his plates and broke his radio into pieces, it was nice of Mr Growler to cook us some food,' she told Rachel.

'And he didn't charge us a penny,' Sophronia chipped in.

'He's grateful we stopped the Millers from winning,' said Rachel.

'My mum told me there's always been bad blood between those two families,' offered Olivia, 'but she can't remember how the feud started.'

'C'mon – we don't want to miss the final race,' Fiona piped up.

'What race is that?' asked Rachel with eager eyes.

'The Egg and Spoon race,' said Sophronia guardedly, 'and after the last round of casualties – I wonder if anyone's going to enter.'

* * *

Rachel and Sophronia sat cross-legged near the front of the stage.

Their headmistress stood before them. In between bouts of coughing and clearing her throat, Rose rattled off the results of the races.

Stewart, William and Alfred cheered and whooped as she read out the game of Marbles as a draw, but the other schoolchildren looked positively stunned on hearing the result. After drinking the entire contents of some disgusting pea-green liquid, Rose's eyes rolled, and she burped so loudly into the microphone that Peggy almost had a heart attack.

'Our sports day is almost at a close,' Rose told the crowd who rallied round and protested in good cheer. 'However, as most of you know, there is just one race left. Bellingtons' Egg and Spoon race has challenged the mighty... it has challenged the just... and it has challenged the bold and foolhardy... but it has never, ever, challenged the chicken,' she added with a broad smile and grinned back at the chuckling crowd.

Rachel glanced around. For the life of her, she couldn't understand why everyone thought Rose's joke was so funny.

'Once again, we owe Mr Lionel Warbler our deepest gratitude, as he has kindly donated six eggs and spoons for the race,' Rose added.

Lionel stood up at the front of the crowd and accepted their applause.

'Regrettably, our new Head Girl, Alice Winterbright, is currently indisposed in the medical wing, so we'll need another person to take her place in the race,' croaked Rose with an asthmatic frog in her throat.

The crowd went silent, and you could've heard a pin drop as their roving eyes stared everywhere except the stage and Rose's pleading face.

'Anyone?' asked Rose, who went even higher up on tiptoes.

Rachel thought hard about Mrs Asquith-Wells' daughter, Penelope, who had won every Egg and Spoon race at Plums. Without thinking it through, she decided to throw caution to the wind, raised her hand and said, 'Mrs Dandelion – I'd like to enter the Egg and Spoon race.'

Rose's face looked a picture as she accepted her offer, but Rachel's friends thought she had completely lost her marbles!

* * *

Lionel and Rose gathered the six Egg and Spoon contestants around a table. At the centre of the table stood a small wooden crate (with the words THIS SIDE UP emblazoned on its lid). Lionel carefully jimmied the cover open and unrolled the thick woolly layers of wrapping therein.

Everyone peered inside.

Six large colourful eggs lay nestled in golden straw. Lionel rubbed his hands together and blew softly on his fingers. He took a deep breath and carefully prised a pale blue egg out of its downy bedding.

'Now then,' he said in a low voice, almost whispering. 'Can anyone tell me what type of bird this egg will grow into?'

Rachel's nose wrinkled, as did the rest of the other contestants.

'A smelly one,' replied the mousy-haired girl.

Everyone laughed.

'It looks like a fancy chocolate Easter Egg,' said the boy with murky brown eyes. 'Why does it smell so bad?'

'It's the egg of a Marsh Nibbler,' said Rachel. 'The pale blue speckled eggshell with the wavy yellow ridges along its circumference is a dead giveaway, and with the five green dots at one end and six pink dots at the other, there's no mistaking this egg for a bird of prey.'

Everyone stared at her in astonishment.

Lionel's face bristled with pride. 'Well done, Miss Cook,' he told her with a twinkle in his eye. 'At least someone's read my books.'

'It appears we have a budding ornithologist in our midst,' Rose told Rachel with equal praise. 'When you've settled in at Bellingtons – you should join Mr Warbler's after school class.'

'I'm sure your uncle would approve, as Professor Shire's a bit of an expert himself,' Lionel chuckled and placed the stinky egg back into the

crate. 'Well, it's almost time to start the race – now, Mrs Dandelion would you be so kind and explain the rules of the race to our contestants.'

Rose cleared her throat. 'The object of the Egg and Spoon Race is to use your spoon to carry the egg across the field. However, I must stress that time is of the essence. Slow and steady will not win you the race.'

Now, one of you will be carrying the egg of a Marsh Nibbler. It's disguised amongst the chicken eggs, but you'll soon know who has it,' she told them in a gravelly voice. 'Whoever gets the Marsh Nibbler over the finishing line wins the race. But remember – the Marsh Nibbler's a slippery customer,' she added hoarsely.

Someone coughed. Sister Wiggly rushed over to Rose and handed her a tumbler of amber liquid. 'And please, no broken bones, gouging of eyes and especially no biting,' Peggy told the contestants, briefly coming out of her shell. 'Matron Crowling is busy disinfecting the hospital wing – so we don't want to burden her with any more patients this afternoon.'

The contestants nodded glumly. Behind them, the restless crowd made loud squawking noises and flapped their arms about.

'Looks like the crowd's eager for the race to begin,' chortled Lionel. 'OK, everyone – follow me to the starting line.'

* * *

Rachel sniffed her egg once more: her speckled shell smelt of musty hay, not marshland. *Who had the Marsh Nibbler*, she thought, still keeping an eye on her egg as it rocked gently in her cumbersome silver spoon.

'Would the contestants for the Egg and Spoon race please get ready,' Lionel announced over the excited hubbub of the crowd.

Rachel placed her right shoe up against the white line.

'ON YOUR MARKS...' Lionel shouted.

Rachel gripped the spoon's handle and steadied her nerves.

'GET SET...'

The crowd waited expectantly...

'GO!'

The crowd screamed as the contestants took to their heels.

Rachel knew her speed wouldn't help her win the race, so she hung back and kept a close eye on her competitors' eggs, wondering how she would know which one of them carried the egg of the Marsh Nibbler –

The other contestants' spoons dropped to the ground.

Rachel's hand shuddered and dropped as well: her spoon felt like dead weight. Her egg cracked wide open, and a yellowish chick stared back at her. Right in front of her eyes, the chick changed colour and grew at a disturbing rate. The chirping chick moulted and kept on growing. Brown hues of plumage rippled out of its pale skin, and a red fleshy lump sprouted out from its crown. Her fully-grown cockerel gave her a shrill, 'cock-a-doodle-do', flapped down to the ground and squawked away.

Over to her left, the mousy-haired girl's grin flourished as a razor-sharp talon cut a craggy hole through the top of her eggshell.

Behind her, scattering fowl flew out of the way of a wild scrawny girl who blazed across the field, and with an ear-piercing scream of triumph, she rugby tackled the mousy-haired girl to the ground.

To Rachel's astonishment, a fledgeling Marsh Nibbler flapped about, trying to free itself from the girls' clawing clutches.

'GET OFF ME, JUDITH,' the mousy-haired bellowed.

'NOT A CHANCE, PENNY,' the scrawny girl shouted back.

Rachel's eyes widened even more as the Marsh Nibbler doubled, then trebled in size, breaking free and screeching at the girls who suddenly screamed out in utter disgust. With their long hair and school uniforms dripping with oily black goo, they slipped and stumbled away from the squawking bird that continued to grow to well over six feet tall.

The words from Lionel's book came flooding back, and she backed away from the Marsh Nibbler as it rose and raised its wings in defence.

Its long sabre-sharp beak snapped at the girls as they ran for cover.

Peggy rushed to the girls' aid, but she gagged and covered her nose with her sleeve to stem their foul, overpowering odour. Over by the rubbish bins, a redheaded boy rushed at the Marsh Nibbler's spindly legs.

'STEPHEN, KEEP AWAY FROM IT,' bellowed Lionel.

The boy clamped his arms around the bird's long legs; it flapped its wings so fast, it took him high into the sky, but he lost his grip due to the slippery goo, and he hit the ground with a sickening snapping sound.

With her medical kit trailing behind her, Peggy bolted towards him, but the Marsh Nibbler faced her and raised its wings threateningly.

Lionel came dashing out onto the field. 'Peggy, get back,' he screamed. 'It's grown far too much,' he added with foreboding and waved her away.

The Marsh Nibbler snapped at the boy's head.

'Lionel – just look at his arm,' yelled Peggy. 'I have to get to him.'

Rachel had to get Peggy to the injured boy, but she needed a shield or something to protect herself from the bird's deadly beak – and then

she saw it. Keeping a wary eye on the Marsh Nibbler, she tore across the field and grabbed a metal lid from one of the rubbish bins.

Set in deep custard-yellow sockets, the Marsh Nibbler fiery ruby eyes followed her every move. As she zigzagged towards the bird, it stamped its right leg and lowered its head as if it was about to charge.

Lionel and Peggy stood frozen to the spot – not daring to spook it.

Rachel trod cautiously, and as the boy's eyes met hers, she put her finger to her mouth, urging him not to make a sound, but at that precise moment, a loud bang thundered and rumbled through the air.

The Marsh Nibbler whirled its head around towards the sound, and Rachel seized her chance and bolted towards the distracted bird.

Stephen suddenly let out a scream and clutched at his twisted arm.

The Marsh Nibble spun around, but Rachel's striking speed won out, and she slammed the lid against the side of its head, hoping to knock the bird out, but its serrated beak punched the lid as if it were butter.

With its saw-like beak barely missing her fingers, Rachel leapt out of harm's way, but she stumbled badly and collapsed onto the ground.

With most of the stuffing well and truly knocked out of her, she fought the throbbing chest pain and slowly got back onto her feet. The Marsh Nibbler smashed the lid against the ground in a tireless frenzy, so it hadn't noticed she'd dashed towards the bins and grabbed another lid.

Rachel looked on in utter horror as the bird stumbled back – almost trampling Stephen, who cowered helplessly beneath its sweeping wings. There wasn't time to think, and she ran and then launched herself at the Marsh Nibbler again, but this time the bird's blazing speed and cunning won out, and it brought its lethal talons to bear with murderous accuracy.

And at that moment, Rachel dropped to her knees and felt its talons skimming the top of her head. The talons missed by a hair's breadth, but they sliced through the lid, and she didn't hesitate and brought the severed lid down on its right foot. As the Marsh Nibbler screamed and staggered about in agony, she shot to her feet and quickly stepped back.

The stricken bird faltered for a few seconds, but it raised its head and smashed the lid so hard against a splintered tree trunk, it came free and spinning metal and bits of wood flew over the tops of the stunned crowd.

With its flaming ruby eyes full of fury, the Marsh Nibbler rounded on Rachel with a cruel penetrating stare that oozed malicious intent.

'GO, PEGGY GO,' Lionel bellowed with panic plastered across his pallid face, quickly reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a ball of string; he reached into his other pocket and pulled out a piece of metal.

Peggy rushed to Stephen's side.

'Rachel – I'm going to try to lure it away,' Lionel called out as he tied one end of the string around the metal and spun it high above his head.

The Marsh Nibbler turned towards Lionel. It put its head on one side and stumbled over towards him as if hypnotised. He watched with relief as Peggy dragged Stephen away, all the while spinning the metal object above his head, backing away from the crowd of shocked onlookers –

With a sharp twang, the metal object broke away from the string, and the humming ceased. The Marsh Nibbler snapped out of its drowsy daze and gave a deafening screech as its wings ploughed down. Its powerful feet found their mark and smashed into Lionel's chest, knocking him over the table, sending his crate of fragile eggs flying with him.

As the furious bird spread its wings and loomed menacingly over his unmoving body, Rachel sped towards the nearest table, scooped up a black cotton sheet and sped back towards it as fast as she could.

With its wings spread even wider, the Marsh Nibbler swung around and faced her. Thinking on her feet, she pressed home her advantage and threw the sheet over her shoulders.

Rachel puffed up her cheeks and edged slowly towards the belligerent bird. With the Marsh Nibbler thoroughly distracted and its eyes on her, Peggy and Mary rushed the blubbering boy away on a stretcher.

Lionel groaned and started to stir. Rachel had to lure the bird away from him, so she flipped her tongue against the roof of her mouth and prayed his third book on birds spoke the truth about its Achilles' heel.

Rachel mimicked the bird's stance, made herself look even bigger and barrelled towards it, clicking her tongue even faster as she charged.

With a petrified squawk, the Marsh Nibbler turned tail, staggered and stumbled as it pounded the ground in its haste to escape.

Flapping in desperation, the bird gave a final terrifying screech and took to the skies over the heads of the cowering crowd.

Physically exhausted, Rachel crashed to her knees and watched the Marsh Nibbler as it swooped high over Bellingtons' altitudinous towers.

The crowd leapt out of their seats and let out a raucous roar.

Peggy rushed over towards Lionel. 'C'mon, Lionel – let's get you back onto your feet,' she told him. 'Easy now – you took quite a knock from that angry bird,' she added soothingly, but Lionel wasn't listening and stared at Rachel with wondrous wide eyes.

Sophronia bolted out of her seat, closely followed by Stewart, Alfred, William and George, who rushed towards Rachel and cheered her as they held her aloft. Above the applauding and swelling crowd, Sophronia's elated voice bellowed, 'BEST EGG AND SPOON RACE EVER!'

At the bustling awards ceremony, Rachel stood with her friends in the sea of schoolchildren. *Ian Inchman had certainly mastered Thomas Shire's appearance and mannerisms*, she thought, but as he dished out the awards, she couldn't shake the nagging feeling that something wasn't right.

Rose took over the stage and asked for silence. 'Thank you, Professor Shire, for honouring our pupils with your presence today,' she told him warmly and motioned the crowd to applaud their benefactor.

The crowd showed their appreciation until Rose stepped forward and hushed them. 'I have a special announcement to make... Now, it's with a heavy heart that Bellingtons will no longer host the Egg and Spoon race,' she said, giving Lionel a shot of regret.

The crowd shook their heads at the unexpected grave news.

'However...' she continued, ignoring their disapproving muttering and murmurings. 'However, Bellingtons, with the approval of Professor Shire, would like to honour the past contestants who've tried to achieve the unachievable, so would you please show them your appreciation and adulation,' she added and joined in with the crowd's jubilation.

As the crowd eventually fell silent, Mary stepped forward and took over the proceedings. 'I've only been at Bellingtons for a short while, but I've managed to meet most of you by now,' she said warmly. 'This school has a growing reputation in instilling in its pupils to choose the right thing – no matter what, so before I bring our sports day to a close, our governors wish to honour one such person who's gone above and beyond.

This selfless person put herself in danger to protect others. There is no higher praise than we can give her, but to award Miss Rachel Cook the winner of our Egg and Spoon race and our deepest thanks,' she added proudly and waved Rachel to come and join her on stage.

Rachel's face turned the colour of beetroot. Her friends smacked her on the back and pushed her forward. Pupils she didn't even know were whistling and chanting her name, and with every step, camera flashes blinded her as she waded through the crowd and onto the stage.

Mary placed the black ribbon and gold medal over Rachel's head and whispered, '*I never got to thank you for being there for Jack.*'

Rachel went to say something, but Mary pulled away and with tears welling up in her eyes, she spoke into the microphone, 'As I bring our sports day to a close, would you please put your hands together for the only pupil to ever get a Marsh Nibbler over the finishing line.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Twin Dilemma

Rachel groaned. 'But, Mum – I need to take a shower and change,' she implored. 'William and Alfred are expecting me, and for once, I don't want to be fashionably late,' she added grouchyly.

'Just one more photograph, Rachel,' Lorraine pleaded.

'Promise,' Rachel sighed.

'Promise,' replied Lorraine.

'My arms are about to fall off,' Paul moaned.

'Smile once more for the camera,' Lorraine insisted.

Rachel forced another smile, but the flash failed to go off.

With a look of relief, Paul put his camera down on the kitchen table. 'The battery's given up the ghost, but I think I've taken enough pictures already,' he said gruffly and emptied his stone-cold tea into the sink. 'I'll pop the film over to The Nutty Pine in the morning and get Elspeth to developed it in her darkroom,' he added wearily and yawned.

Lorraine glanced up at the clock on the wall. 'Paul, it's only five-thirty. Why don't you take it over to her right now? I'm sure Morag and Elspeth wouldn't mind you dropping in,' she said cajolingly. 'I'd like Rachel's picture in the newspaper first thing tomorrow morning.'

'Mum, are you sure Mrs Asquith-Wells reads *The Weekly Wrap*?' asked Rachel leadingly. 'Wouldn't it just be easier just to tell Ms Harlequin?'

'I've already told Vivian,' she replied with a smug, self-satisfied grin, 'but I want Cynthia and Penelope to see your happy smiling face with the Egg and Spoon medal draped around your neck.'

* * *

'*She's here,*' yelled Lorraine from the living room. '*C'mon, Rachel – your hair will be bone dry by the time we get there.*'

The Cooks piled out of their front door and headed towards Gladys' tram that had mounted the kerb with little care or attention.

Leaving the chilly air behind, Rachel entered the tram and winced as Gladys hugged and congratulated her on winning the Egg and Spoon race. Lorraine pulled Rachel away from Gladys' rib-crushing clutches, and they sat down in the last remaining three seats way back in the stern.

George, Elspeth and Morag boarded, but they had to squeeze through the throng of revellers who made plenty of merry. The tram struggled to pick up speed along the bumpy High Street and rocked from side to side.

Welded and riveted to the buckled metal floor, George clung on for dear life onto one of the four rusty whaling spears in the cramped aisle.

Rachel, however, had problems of her own: singing deafeningly into her left lughole and accompanied by a rather old-fashioned, out-of-tune accordion, the inebriated musician regaled the revellers with slurring sea shanties of old, and she wondered how long she would have to put up with the dreadful din from his squeezebox.

* * *

Hazy strands of sunlight marshalled in the twilight. Everyone shouted 'whoopsy daisy' as the tram went up on the kerb as it cut the corner into Damson Drive. As they lumbered into Rhubarb Road, the dismal housing estate appeared even greyer as Gladys parked her tram unceremoniously between Mrs Mullins' old banger and Growler's greasy hot dog van.

Rachel and George left Lorraine and Paul nattering to Gladys about something to do with Doris and Stanley Croom's imprisonment.

The tram's revellers disembarked with song and dance and headed towards the tables stacked end to end down the middle of the road.

Rachel paused by the kerb and looked up and down Rhubarb Road: all the streetlights were off, and as her eyes adjusted to the dark, she could just see slivers of candlelight through the residents' curtains.

'THE POWER'S BEEN OUT FOR ALMOST TWO HOURS,' bellowed an irritated voice from across the road. 'CUCUMBER CLOSE, LETTICE LANE AND AUBERGINE AVENUE ARE OFF AS WELL.'

'OK – I'LL GO AND RUSTLE UP SOME MORE LANTERNS,' another voice bellowed. 'LOOKS LIKE THE STREET PARTY'S ABOUT TO BEGIN.'

'I hope you've been eating lots of carrots?' Rachel asked George with a chuckle. 'You're going to need good eyesight tonight.'

'I eat so many of them at The Nutty Pine – my skin's turning orange,' he retorted. 'Look over there – the power's not off everywhere,' he added poignantly, nodding towards Marrow Mews and its well-to-do houses.

'Oh, dear, the lights in Damson Drive have all gone out,' Rachel said.

'Well, it's not going to stop the street party,' Paul informed the pair of them, rubbing his hands to warm them up. 'Elsbeth and Morag have promised me they'll be some homebrewed beer on offer tonight.'

Lorraine rushed up to them. 'Gladys apologises – but she can't make the party,' she said, slightly rattled. 'She's working tonight, but she said she'll pick us up as promised, however, she might be a little bit late.'

Paul appeared crestfallen. 'I was hoping to catch up and talk about old times,' he grumbled. 'We've still got a lot of catching up to do.'

'Cheer up, Dad,' said Rachel. 'There's always Mrs Mullins to talk to.'

Paul harrumphed but grinned. 'As long as the beer flows, I don't care who I talk to,' he said buoyantly. The street filled with cries and screams of jubilation. '*C'mon, Lorraine – it looks like the party's in full swing.*'

Rachel and George said their hurried goodbyes and zigzagged down the pavement that had more holes than Swiss cheese. Running late, they quickened their step and headed towards Alfred and William's house.

The houses along Rhubarb Road looked very much alike; however, the house they had just passed appeared completely out of character with the rest of the road: its unkempt garden had gone wild some time ago, and its thick-tarred roof tiles were barely visible, as clumps of moss and grass had grown over most of them. As far as she could tell, the frontage of the property had just one measly window: awash with mildew, the glass porthole sat at the centre of the shabby front door that appeared as if it hadn't had a scrub in a month of Sundays – let alone a lick of paint.

George opened Alfred and William's side gate.

Rachel followed him through, but as she went to close the gate, she gave the next-door neighbour's house a further look.

Behind its doughnut-shaped exterior, overgrown weeds almost hid a vibrant vegetable garden and bulrushes threatened to smother the semicircle of black wooden beehives. A massive dome of fine wire mesh entombed the garden's plants and its insects. Black bombinating bees emitted bright blue points of light as they bounced off its metal surface.

Rachel felt another headache brewing and quickly closed the gate.

'Hey, Rachel – Sophronia's calling us over,' George said.

William greeted them. 'Welcome to our humble abode,' he chuckled.

'Some of us have a lovely sea view,' added Alfred as he joined them, 'but most of us only have the crematorium and the graveyard to look at.'

'At least your neighbours are quiet,' Rachel offered.

'Well, except on Halloween, of course,' William chortled.

'Where are Alice and Mary?' Rachel asked.

'Oh, they're busy helping out Mrs Dandelion back at Bellingtons,' sighed William with disinterest. '*Those two are a right couple of swots.*'

Stewart came around the corner with a young girl whose golden hair still glistened in the diminishing twilight. 'Good, you two finally made it. William and Alfred were about to organise a search party, but I very much doubt they could find their way out of a paper bag,' he sniggered.

The young girl jabbed him gently in the ribs, and with the speed of a cheetah, she rushed forward and gave Rachel a warm hug and stepped back. 'It's good to see you again, Rachel – it's been a long time.'

Rachel's eyes widened in shock. 'Sally?' she squealed, dumbfounded by the girl's remarkable healthy appearance.

'In the flesh – and feeling better than ever,' said Sally bright-eyed and twirled on the spot with an infectious giggle.

'Doctor Foster's done wonders,' beamed Stewart and squeezed his sister's hand affectionately. 'Even when the other doctors had given up on Sally, Fidelia never gave up on a cure,' he added, looking grateful.

'How is Doctor Foster keeping?' Rachel asked as she thought about the strange words she had spoken at Captain Eddie's restaurant.

'Not good,' Sally replied with a heavy sigh. 'Doctor Foster's helped me so much, but she can't even help herself.'

'Even Doctor Gloucester can't fathom out her illness,' added Stewart, 'and she's so ill, she's just taken to her bed again.'

'Um – a little bit of help over here,' said a concerned voice.

Sophronia rushed over and helped Pauline Marsh with her overloaded tray of party food and glassware. George leapt into action and grabbed the tubby glass jug as it began to slide backwards.

'Now be careful with that jug, George,' Pauline fussed. 'It's not easy fermenting by candlelight – and I've just run out of honeycomb.'

'It weighs a ton,' he hissed and placed it down on the garden table. 'It smells so sweet – and it's making my head swim.'

'It's not alcoholic,' Pauline huffed. 'It's the unique qualities of the nectar that give it that peculiar heady smell.'

'I'm assuming this is a new concoction of yours?' Sophronia asked Pauline cautiously. 'I'm guessing it's safe for a bunch of ten-year-olds?'

'Well, I've tried it, and I haven't died yet,' Pauline scoffed and poured the runny black concoction into a set of wine glasses.

'Right, everyone – take a glass,' said Stewart.

They all grabbed a glass and took a furtive sniff of the black contents.

'Now, Pauline would like to say a few words,' Stewart added.

Pauline removed her black-splattered apron. 'First of all, I'd like to welcome you all to the Rhubarb Street Party – which Professor Shire has kindly organised and paid for,' she told them with a sparkle in her eye. 'I would like to take this opportunity to welcome you all to Bellingtons. They say that every cloud has a silver lining, and I believe that losing Gravelings is a blessing in disguise for its pupils and I hope, its teachers.'

'And there's never a dull moment at Bellingtons,' Sophronia added.

'We're quite looking forward to a change of scenery,' William grinned at Alfred, who nodded his approval of their new school.

Stewart's face looked horrified. '*What on earth is wrong with you two?*' Stewart snapped, thinking they had gone completely mad. 'We're still going to be stuck in an overheated, overcrowded class of smelly pupils.'

'Unlike most schools, pupils at Bellingtons get to go out on regular trips to further their education,' said Sophronia. 'Only the other week, our class went on a day trip to the Inklings and visited Chieftom Priory.'

'And the weekend before that, our class went on a boat trip to the Island of Mugnoth,' added Pauline fondly. 'That was great fun, and Tiffany Snobbings was so sick, she fell overboard into the drink. Those fiery-red pincer crabs did not want to let go of her ears.'

'Don't forget about Richard Nooks,' Sophronia informed Pauline with a chuckle. 'Remember, he got stuck in the stinky mud right up to his waist. He would have drowned if the monks hadn't come to his rescue.'

'You see, Stew – Bellingtons is right up our alley,' William sniggered. 'I can't wait until the next class outing – and I think its odds on one of us will get a near-death experience.'

Stewart gave them a resigned smile. 'Would you please raise your glasses, he said with a rising grin. 'I'd like to make a toast – a toast to Bellingtons for taking Gravelings' staff and its pupils into their ranks.'

Everyone held their glasses high, lowered them and drank; seconds later, they nodded their approval of Pauline's latest concoction.

'If you wouldn't mind – I'd like to make a toast,' said Sophronia, a little shyly. They all nodded and took another sip of the black syrup. 'Since my father died, I've found it harder to fit in at Bellingtons, and I felt like I didn't belong there anymore – but along came a girl who stood up for me and taught me that no matter what – true friends stick by you.'

Rachel gave Sophronia a gracious smile, and a lump formed in her throat as she gulped down Pauline's addictive drink.

William's eyes narrowed. 'There's one thing that's been nagging me about the Egg and Spoon race,' he asked Rachel. 'How did you managed to get the Marsh Nibbler over the finishing line with just a bit of cloth?'

'Yes, how did you manage that impossible feat?' added Alfred.

Rachel beamed then blushed. 'Lionel Warbler's book *Birds of Prey for Beginners* came in handy,' she told them. 'He'd written a footnote, which mentioned Marsh Nibblers are terrified of bats. Something about their fear being handed down through the generations –'

They hung on her every word, but her stomach groaned and lurched unpleasantly. Her stomach groaned again, and she could feel it shrinking as she felt a flood of bile rising up her rasping throat.

'What's the matter, Rachel?' asked Sally heatedly.

'I – I need the bathroom,' she spluttered, taking deep breaths.

'Our bathroom is out of order,' said William apologetically, looking concerned as she retched uncontrollably. *'If you head down by the garage – you should see our old brick privy in our back garden.'*

'I know the way,' said Pauline, rushing to Rachel's side. *'C'mon – I'll take you there,'* she added worriedly and almost dragged her around the side of the garage and into the shadows.

* * *

Retching over the toilet bowl, Rachel hadn't been sick, but it was a near thing. On top of the Victorian cast-iron cistern, the lantern's lacklustre light illuminated the privy's walls, cobwebs and numerous piles of dust, but it flickered annoyingly for a minute then died. The privy closed in on her, and she felt claustrophobic. Faint rustling noises cut through the uncomfortable silence, so she got up off the filthy floor, stamped her feet to scare the somethings away and stumbled out of the door.

The moon's veiled light fell across the grim gravestones and gardens. Looking anxious, Pauline leant against an oak tree, chewing on her nails.

'Sorry about that,' Rachel told her. *'I don't know what came over me. I haven't felt that queasy since eating my father's sticky toffee pudding.'*

'I'm glad you're OK... um... you – you won't tell Captain Eddie about your upset tummy?' asked Pauline with nervous apprehension. *'If he even gets a whiff that my drinks aren't safe to drink, he'll go somewhere else – and my mother still owes so much money to the bank.'*

'I'm sure it's just me, Pauline. I must have drunk it down far too quickly,' said Rachel reassuringly. *'So, Pauline, tell me what was in that addictive black drink of yours?'* she added, trying her utmost not to burp.

Pauline's eyes looked furtively about. *'It's the prized nectar from Mr Grubbins' midnight bees and some of my secret ingredients,'* she said, somewhat hesitantly. *'You probably saw his bees buzzing in his back garden over there,'* she added with a quick sideways nod.

'Why are his bees trapped underneath that wire mesh?' Rachel asked.

'His bees get a bit cranky in the moonlight, and they would escape,' she informed her. *'Um, I think we should be getting back to the party.'*

Rachel's stomach grumbled. 'You go back and tell them I'll be along in a little while,' she told her. 'I need some fresh air and a walk around.'

Pauline gave her an uneasy smile and headed towards the garage...

As she vanished into the shadows, Rachel gave the moon an upward glance; it hung a little higher overhead, giving the graveyard and gardens a bit more light, so they appeared less depressing, and it gave her more than enough illumination to look around the overgrown garden and forgotten flowerbeds that were in desperate need of tender loving care.

Dodging a pile of discarded watering cans and a couple of overturned wheelbarrows, she slowly made her way back towards the garage, but she suddenly stopped dead in her tracks.

Over the ivy-matted wall, she heard the sounds of scuffling followed by a couple of sharp cries. Hunched over to keep a low profile, she crept towards the back of the garden, where a rusty iron gate barred her way.

Her eyes grew as large and as bright as the moon above her as two shadowy figures swung back and forth, wrestling with one another at the end of next-door's driveway, but their grunts ended with a muffled cry, as one of the figures had doubled over and crumpled to the ground.

Not daring to breathe, Rachel heard a groan and watched the limp figure being stowed into the open boot of a car. The other figure stood motionless, but with a snap decision, they dashed towards the house and disappeared through the open door by the ginormous glass conservatory.

What was she to do? Should she go and tell her friends? The figure could be back any second, but first, she had to investigate who or what was in the boot.

Rachel climbed carefully over the gate, but it squeaked so loudly, she threw herself over it and landed in a pile of something very soft and squishy. Her nostrils protested as she wiped the stinky manure off her shoes on the cut grass and inched her way across the flowerbeds because the rough gravel stones would have made too much noise underfoot.

Skirting around an impressive whale-inspired water fountain that had a ship at its centrepiece, she tiptoed towards the black car.

The Black Duke stood before her, its bodywork blending in with the stark shadows, as it lay hidden, sandwiched between a shed and a wall.

Rachel's heart raced. She bit her lower lip, stepped towards the boot and peered inside. Lashings of rope tied a pair of hands and feet together, and a black hood covered the figure's head. A touch of uneasiness tugged at her frayed nerves, but she reached out and whipped the hood away.

The gagged face of Professor Thomas Shire stared back at her, but a loud gasp over her shoulder made her whirl around on the spot.

Rachel's stifled scream fell on death ears. The damp cloth clamped down even harder against her face as she fought her unknown assailant.

Her mind felt fuzzy, and her blurry vision started to swim. With the world in a swirl of delirious daze, she summarily dropped to her knees. Her eyes wandered aimlessly about, but just before she blacked out, they caught sight of a pair of brown boots and gingham socks.

* * *

Rachel started to stir. The chiming from a nearby clock grew louder and much clearer. The relentless pealing brought her back into conciseness. She prised her eyelids open, looked at her ankles and hands and at the binding rope that bound them.

A raised voice nearby reeked of desperation and snarled, *'I won't tell you again – give me the key to the cells.'*

Rachel's vision came into focus, and she saw two men in front of her; she recoiled as a tattooed fist slammed into the policeman's stomach. The policeman groaned, slumped to one side and fell unconscious. The other man removed his brass knuckle-duster with an air of annoyance.

Rachel shut her eyes and feigned sleep.

The rank smell of hot garlic breath washed over her, and a rough hand clamped around her cheeks. Her eyes snapped open, and she stared into the wild hazel eyes of a pockmarked face who she recognised as the man who had sat next to Doris Croom in court.

'Now then, don't get any funny ideas about escaping,' he told her aggressively, his hand squeezing her cheeks even harder. 'Anyway, I very much doubt even you could hop away quickly enough to raise the alarm.'

Rachel shook her head to one side, dislodging the man's hand. 'I'm faster than you think,' she retorted. *'And anyway, where are we exactly?'*

'The Motte & Bailey Crown Court,' said a voice from across the room.

The heavy iron door to her right slowly swung open, and Thomas Shire stepped over the threshold followed by Doris Croom. Handcuffed and trailing closely behind them, another Thomas Shire shuffled inside with a blood-splattered ripped shirt and a nasty bruised eye.

'I take it we still don't have the key, Jim?' the first Thomas asked the pockmarked face man. The felled policeman stirred and groaned. The first Thomas rushed over to the policeman's side. 'You didn't have to hit him, Jim – violence isn't the answer to everything!'

Jim gave Rachel a resigned look and stood up. 'He'll live,' he said cuttingly. 'You better hope I can pick the lock to the cells – Cripps' locks are the best in the country,' he added with oodles of admiration.

'We have little time left,' snapped the first Thomas. 'It won't be long before they know we have Doris – and they'll be down here in a jot.'

Rachel fumed (she hadn't felt this angry since Betty Neap stole her backpack and read her personal diary out to her classmates at Plums). 'I bet Mum doesn't know about your plan to break the Crooms out of jail, Uncle Thomas,' she spat, knowing the cat was definitely out of the bag.

The second Thomas coughed. 'That's not your uncle, Rachel,' he told her awkwardly. 'I am,' he added sadly and gave her a look of regret.

Rachel's confused face went back and forth, staring at each Thomas in turn. The second Thomas smiled back at her. 'Hullo, Uncle Thomas, it's a pleasure to finally meet you at last,' she said flourishingly. 'I'd shake your hand, but I'm a bit tied up at the moment,' she added glumly.

'I knew I couldn't keep up the pretence for long, and I knew sooner or later I would give myself away,' he replied, wriggling his handcuffs.

'I didn't know for sure,' Rachel said, 'but after you drove *The Black Duke* along Satan's Scar to Bellingtons – well, that had me thinking.'

'Your mother told me you were smart,' Thomas grinned.

Rachel stared daggers at the false Thomas. 'You can drop my uncle's accent, Ian,' she told him sternly, withholding her rising temper. 'Why did you drug me? Friends don't normally tie friends up!'

Ian shrugged his shoulders and sighed. 'I'm breaking the Crooms out of jail,' he said indignantly. 'Henry Silverback wants his pound of flesh, and he doesn't care who gets in the way – or what laws he breaks.'

To her left, Jim cursed as he attempted to pick the lock on the heavy iron door. Beads of sweat sprouted from his furrowed and irritated brow.

'Shouldn't we untie Rachel?' Doris suggested. 'She's no threat.'

'Go ahead, Doris,' replied Ian and gave Rachel an apologetic smile.

Doris gave Rachel an anxious look as she untied the ropes. 'It's not what you think,' she told her. 'Stanley and I aren't murderers.'

'I can vouch for that,' Thomas offered. 'Stanley and Doris are as law-abiding as they come.'

'I would have to agree,' added Ian. 'If the town's people only knew what horrors Henry is capable of, they would throw him in jail and bust the key, leaving him to rot like so many other innocent people he's put away over the years to suit his own devilish ends!'

Doris helped Rachel back onto her feet.

Jim cursed in frustration. 'It's no use, Ian,' he growled, 'I just can't open this blasted lock.'

'*Then my husband is lost,*' cried Doris despairingly, dubbing her eyes with a frayed handkerchief to keep her tears at bay.

Rachel felt miserable as Jim tried to comfort Doris in her misery, so she decided to act and forced her brain to recall her mother's words back at Shire's Waterpark. With her memory coming up trumps, she stared into Ian's downtrodden face. '*I can get you into the cells,*' she told him, 'but on one condition,' she added bluntly and hated herself for saying it.

'Unless you've got light fingers and stolen the spare set of keys from that curd McDonald – or maybe a few sticks of dynamite up your sleeve, there's absolutely no way through this door,' argued Jim pugnaciously.

'I'm listening, Rachel,' Ian replied.

'You will release my uncle from his handcuffs,' she said sternly.

'Not a bleedin' chance,' Jim scoffed.

'We have no choice,' Ian said.

'Handcuffs first,' Rachel demanded.

Ian reached into his pocket and took out a small key.

'You won't be needing that,' said Thomas airily, placing the open handcuffs into Ian's hands. 'I could've escaped – but I didn't.'

Thomas gave Rachel a sly grin.

'Can you really open the cell door, Rachel?' Doris trembled.

'I'll do my best,' she replied and knelt down beside Jim.

'*You better not be playing tricks on us,*' whispered Jim threateningly.

Rachel shifted her posture. On opening the palm of her hand, she read the small inscription on the back of the brass pocket watch:

To Jim Amoretto:

*Awarded for twenty-five years of exemplary service to Johnson,
Johnson & Johnson & Co.*

'Um – I believe this is your watch, Mr Amoretto,' she said sheepishly. 'I think my fingers are light-fingered enough – don't you?'

Jim said nothing as she handed his watch back to him.

Rachel counted the eleven etched bees that encircled the well-worn keyhole. 'Now then, let me see if I can remember this correctly...' she said and grabbed the doorknob. 'It was left – then right – then left again – then up... no... it was down – then up – then counterclockwise – then clockwise – and then up and down four times and pull –'

CLICK.

The doorknob drooped. Rachel stood up and pushed the door ajar. Everyone uttered a sound of sheer disbelief, and even Jim gave her a subtle grin of respect as he grabbed his lock picking tools.

Doris barged past them and flew into the room. *'Jim – Jim – Stanley's here,'* she squealed with delight.

Jim ran after her. Ian ushered Rachel and Thomas inside the dismal room of cramped cells that smelt, amongst other things, of stale sweat, burnt tobacco, candle wax and rising damp.

Atop a Victorian mahogany writing desk, two squat oil lamps burned silently as mounds of piled-high paper smothered its writing slope. The dull stone floor appeared uninviting even in the dancing light, and the rough square flint walls glistened with moisture and patches of mould.

Rachel stood by the desk and watched as Stanley fell to his knees and pressed his gaunt withdrawn face hard against the rusty cell bars.

'You shouldn't have come,' Stanley told Doris mournfully. *'You've put yourself and everyone here in the most terrible danger.'*

Doris went down too and clasped his bony hands through the bars. *'They're here because they know you're innocent,'* she wept.

Jim stared at the sturdy cell door. *'This lock should be easy to pick,'* he mumbled under his breath. *'I have you out in no time, Stanley.'*

Ian sidled up to the messy desk. *'There's no time for that, Jim,'* he told him, pushed the papers off the writing slope and fiddled underneath its velvety green top. *'Now, if I remember correctly – ah, ha...'*

Rachel watched as Ian marched over to Stanley's cell, placed a key in the lock and turned it. Doris rose to her feet and pushed herself through the cell door that had barely opened halfway.

Ian and Jim followed and got Stanley to his feet.

'C'mon, Stanley,' Jim told him. *'You don't belong in this place.'*

Rachel felt pity for Stanley Croom as they dragged his frail body to the desk and eased him down onto a sturdy walnut chair.

'So, what's the plan, Ian?' Jim asked. *'You've kept us all in the dark.'*

Thomas interjected. *'I think Ian has other accomplices waiting in the wings,'* he said knowingly. *'My guess he's taking Doris and Stanley so far away that even the law can't touch them. He's keeping you in the dark to protect you from ending up in those damp cells.'*

Ian faced Thomas. *'Even back then, you were always one step ahead of everyone else, including the police,'* said Ian begrudgingly. *'You know what you have to do, Thomas – let's get it over and done with –'*

Rachel gasped as Thomas' left hand ploughed into Ian's face, and with his right grabbing hold of his shirt, he hit Ian once more, ripping his shirt as he collapsed to his knees with a grunt.

Doris and Jim rounded on Thomas.

Ian held his hand up to stop them. '*I – I deserved that,*' he pronounced and slowly got up off the floor, wiping his bloodied nose with his shirt cuffs. 'Thomas is right – I'm the one that must stay behind and face the wrath of Commissioner McDonald for letting our prisoners escape – and I must look like I've put up a fight –'

Muffled groans came drifting in from the other room. Through the open iron door, the woozy policeman scrambled to his feet, stumbled as he fumbled for something beneath the oaken desk.

Doris suddenly spun on her heels, grabbed the heavy hardback book by her side and hurled it through the doorway. With surprising accuracy, the book found its mark, and the policeman gave a half-hearted cry as the book hit him squarely in the face – knocking him out cold.

The screeching alarm bells rang out.

'*Time's just run out,*' squealed Ian desperately. 'Thomas – get *The Black Duke* started – Doris, Jim, get Stanley onto his feet – you need to get to the rendezvous point on time.'

'And where's that?' Thomas asked.

'Old Hob's Cove,' Ian replied. 'Gladys will fill you in on my plan.'

Thomas gave Ian an uneasy stare and then nodded he understood.

'See you in another life, Ian,' said Thomas darkly and dashed out of the room with Doris and Jim, dragging Stanley along with them.

Ian sniffed and wiped his nose against his sleeve. 'You should go with your uncle,' Ian told Rachel. 'Thomas is a good man, but I'm only just beginning to realise that now,' he added, looking as if he really meant it.

'Why can't I stay here with you?' Rachel demanded. 'I'm sure I could be of some help as a witness, and I can vouch for your bravery.'

Ian raised a smile.

'I thought friends help friends out?' she added.

'Indeed they do,' Ian chuckled. 'C'mon – let's get you to *The Black Duke* – I believe you have other friends to help out tonight.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

End of an Era

Squeezing through a side door, Rachel watched Jim running towards the nearby rail tracks, but she turned and headed in the opposite direction, tearing across the cobbled-stoned courtyard. Thomas slammed on *The Black Duke's* brakes and skidded to a grinding halt beside her, but Rachel flatly refused his demand to stay behind, flung herself into the front seat of the car and flashed Doris and Stanley a hurried smile.

Thomas just shook his head. '*I see stubbornness still runs in our family,*' he muttered exasperatedly and with determination chiselled into his face, he donned his goggles and flipped the switch on its side.

As radiant bursts of rainbow light lit up the interior, Thomas spun the car around, and with a burst of speed, they headed in the opposite direction from the deafening sirens and the bright blue flashing lights.

* * *

The pit of Rachel's stomach tightened as *The Black Juke* swerved around a lumbering lorry and then a horse and cart, and she thought the horse would bolt, but it trotted down the road as if it hadn't seen or heard them at all. They raced along the lane after narrow lane until they emerged at a junction. Thomas hesitated, but he eventually took off towards a row of half-lit flickering neon lights that did little to light the road ahead.

Rachel recognised Lower-Inkcome-by-the-sea's Upper High Street. The typical late night shopping frenzy had all but fizzled out, and most of the shop fronts had closed their shutters. Bright red taillights dazzled them, and *The Black Juke* came to a screeching stop.

'I knew I shouldn't have come this way,' Thomas seethed.

'What's the holdup -?' Doris began.

Blue flashing lights lit up the High Street.

'They've found us,' Stanley squealed and grabbed the door handle.

'WAIT!' Thomas thundered.

Two police cars tailgated an ambulance as they hurtled by.

Thomas let out a sigh of relief. *'You see nothing to worry about,'* he said breathlessly, but the anguish in his voice told a different story.

Stanley relaxed, but Doris looked dead ahead. *'How are we going to get through this traffic?'* she asked agitatedly. *'The road's jam-packed.'*

'We're running out of time, Thomas,' Stanley squeaked.

A veil of uneasiness fell across Thomas' face. 'I'm afraid we have but one option,' he said broodingly, 'but it's a risk we must take.'

'Remember what happened last time?' said Doris fretfully.

Thomas gave Doris an unsettling look and adjusted his goggles.

Rachel's head pounded, and a shrill voice added to her headache.

'Thank you, Mr Parsons,' yelled a woman who staggered out of a shop, almost tripping over a lazy cat that loafed in the doorway. 'My car's parked across the road, so I think I can manage. Give my regards to your lovely wife.'

Many months had flown by, but Rachel still recognised the woman's annoying voice. On the pavement, Ms Flora Dandelion, in her bright billowing dress, tottered unsteadily on her feet as she floundered by the fishmonger's front door with six hatboxes held precariously aloft.

Flora stepped off the kerb, but her shoe stepped in a pile of rotting fish, and both she and her hatboxes fell across *The Black Duke's* bonnet.

Flora groaned as she sat up, but she found her head poking right through an engine block; she looked up and saw Rachel staring down at her through *The Black Duke's* translucent bodywork, and she returned her nervous wave and shocked expression.

The Black Juke crept forward, slowly picking up speed as it melted through the stationary traffic like a hot knife through butter, making headway towards the chaos of cars up ahead of them.

Thomas looked stern, but he flashed Rachel a shrewd smile. 'At least you know how we escaped from that shipwreck so easily,' he told her. 'One of my more successful and less dangerous inventions I might add.'

Rachel said nothing but looked on in awe as their ghost car glided by.

They finally reached the scene of the holdup. Police officers wrote into their notebooks as they talked to the little old lady who sat on a giant ball of wool. The little old lady seemed unfazed by the carnage of cars that surrounded her or the plight of the other drivers who struggled to get out the long strands of wool that had entangled them in the accident.

As they left Mrs Mullins and the chaotic High Street far behind, they travelled at breakneck speed along the eastern approach road.

'We nearly at the corkscrew,' barked Thomas apprehensively.

Rachel's heart fluttered. For almost the entire journey, she had kept her eyes tightly shut, as she found it very disconcerting ploughing through vehicles without so much of a scratch.

'Hold on to your hats,' said Thomas and *The Black Juke* breezed over a humpbacked bridge and met a tractor and trailer on the other side.

Rachel's nostrils twitched, and she sneezed as they shot through the trailer overloaded with hay bales that had that familiar farmyard smell.

‘Look, there’s the ocean up ahead,’ said Thomas. ‘Right, I’m turning it off now,’ he added and let out an exhale that was long overdue.

The Black Juke lost its inner sparkle, and its translucent bodywork slowly began to solidify. With his goggles removed, Thomas swung the car into the corkscrew. The cloudless clear sky allowed the moon’s bright aurora to penetrate the seemingly bottomless canyons below them.

Doris leant forward and said cautiously, ‘Now easy does it, Thomas – you know we don’t want to end up down there –’

Everyone squinted. The cerulean light on the horizon seared their eyes, but its blueish colour changed hue and grew brighter before it died.

Rachel felt a punch to the gut, followed by cascading imprints upon her mind: reel after reel of her friends’ collective memories played out, and at that moment, Thomas, Doris and Stanley’s lives flashed before her eyes so fast, she could barely breathe until their pasts released her.

‘*Did you see the light?*’ Stanley screeched. ‘*We’re too late!*’

Rachel fell forward, and through the landslide of excruciating pain, she barely heard the sounds of wood splitting against wood and the shrill screech of a skid as Thomas jammed on the brakes.

The Black Juke came to a blinding halt.

The stench of rotting flesh and burning rubber brought her back to her senses. Up ahead of them, shadowy boxes rose up from the depths, tumbling over one another as they came crashing down onto the road.

Dead ahead, coalescing in the swirling scurrilous mist, scores of ghostly apparitions burst forth, rising up from their coffin cocoons, fluttering and flittering against the moonlit sky like macabre butterflies.

Thomas cursed at the sickening sight, and his demeanour darkened. ‘*Right, everyone, hang on – we’re going to have to go through them,*’ he yelled, his determined voice masking his fear as he floored the accelerator.

Squealing tyres burned and as quick as a hare the car hurtled towards the silver phantoms, weaving in between the discarded coffins that now littered most of the road. Their bloodcurdling screams filled Rachel with utter dread, as one by one, they swooped down upon *The Black Juke*.

The snug warmth in the car vanished. The sudden cold had caught them unaware, and they all struggled to breathe through the bitter blast.

Ice crystals sparkled in Rachel’s smoggy breath as it began to freeze.

Her weariness threatened to send her into a deep stupor, but Doris’ ear-splitting scream of shock and fear jolted her awake. Looking at the shimmering reflection in the rearview mirror, she watched in horror as Stanley wrestled a festering silver hand that held Doris by the throat.

Almost at once, a snarling silver head punched through the car roof and let out a terrifying wail as its other arm ripped through the canopy, raging and screeching as it wrenched Doris right out of her seat.

'THOMAS, IT'S STILL ON,' Stanley bellowed, 'TURN IT OFF – TURN IT OFF!' he added in a blind panic, holding tightly onto Doris, who had turned blue from asphyxiation as she hung limply in the phantom's grip.

Another silver head and arms punched through the roof and reached inside. The phantom grabbed Stanley by the throat and yanked him out of his seat. Thomas had no choice and skidded from side to side. Bracing for impact, he slammed the car into the wall and jammed on the brakes.

The phantoms screamed as they fell by the wayside.

Thomas grabbed his goggles. He flipped the switches back and forth in the falling temperature, but his fingers fumbled in the freezing cold –

Thomas heard the peculiar whooshing sound, looked up and gulped.

Beyond the windscreen, an albinotic fog tumbled and twisted along the road, rolling right up to and over *The Black Juke's* dented bodywork.

Stanley loosened Doris' clothing and frantically shook her awake.

The Black Juke seemed to shiver from the intense cold, and everyone inside the car recoiled at the sight of so many silver phantoms hovering outside, their maladjusted faces writhing beyond the windscreen as if an invisible force kept most of them at bay and in perpetual agony.

'Take us with you,' pleaded the handful of phantoms whose skeletal stumps hammered away at the frosty windscreen.

Their rank odour of death drifted in through the car's ventilation.

Rachel pressed a handkerchief against her nose to stem the rotting stench of the dead and forced her eyes shut as their cries for clemency grew louder and even more desperate –

'Take me with you... please, I beg you – take me with you.'

The pitiful angelic voice asked again.

Rachel prised her eyes open. Her handkerchief fell into her lap as the head of a young boy pushed through the windscreen and peered down at her. He hovered closer, and she forced herself further back into the seat in shock, not wanting to believe the sight that befell her tear-laden eyes.

'I have no family here – I am alone... I beg you – take me with you,' said the young boy, whose ethereal body glistened against the icy windscreen.

Rachel's dry lips trembled. 'I – I watched you die... I watched you die, Jack,' she said weakly, fighting back against her fraught tears and fear.

The exact likeness of Jack Partridge edged even closer. 'You brought the light that woke me up – you woke us all up,' he said accusingly, his

anguish words laced with bitterness. ‘*Your light is calling them – they will come – they will come for us. I beg you – take me back through the light –*’

Something ridged and cold pushed hard up against her face. As Jack’s spectral form began to fade away, his desperate hand reached out to her, but two ghostly girls grabbed his shoulders and held him back.

Ever so slowly, the albinotic fog began to disperse and thin out.

Rachel felt warm breath against her earlobe, and she heard Doris’ heartfelt appeal as she whispered, ‘*Let him go, Rachel – let them all go...*’

The phantoms howled. Beyond the windscreen, their contorted faces dissipated with the fog and they too vanished into the moonlit night.

Thomas gave Rachel a stark look of determination and drove *The Black Duke* out of the corkscrew and onto the beach. He hit the accelerator, and they sped along Satan’s Scar as if the devil was upon them.

‘WE’RE ALMOST THERE,’ shouted Stanley, peering at the pier lights.

Thomas sounded the car horn, and another car horn mimicked its musical tones. *The Black Duke* ambled over the undulating sand dunes.

Rachel shivered from the cold, but she knew some of it was fear and thought she should have taken Thomas’ advice and stayed behind, but she recalled Ian’s parting words back at the Motte & Bailey Crown Court.

As they drove towards the pier, her headache began to ease, and she tried not to think about Jack’s tormented face and his dire warning that filled her with inexplicable dread.

Parked beside the entrance to the pier, Gladys stepped out of her tram and waved *The Black Duke* over. Thomas asked Rachel to stay in the car.

Eventually, the grownups raised and heated voices petered away, and Gladys opened the car door and helped her out.

Rachel gazed into her ruddy windswept face and returned her warm embrace. Gladys wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. ‘Here, Rachel – you don’t need to wear these anymore,’ she sniffed and removed Jack Partridge’s broken glasses from her clammy face.

Rachel looked over Gladys’ shoulder and raised a glimmer of a smile: the choppy ocean waves lashed the underbelly of the pier and the stumpy steamboat moored by its side.

* * *

Dirty grey clouds of smoke puffed out of Shanghai Suzy’s funnel.

Rachel stood within earshot of the grownups who were discussing their predicament. Thoroughly bored, she wandered towards the wooden pier, keeping a close eye on the ocean waves that crashed beneath her.

The invigorating sea air had lifted her mood, but the ghostly image of Jack and his parting words still played on her mind.

He blamed her for their anguish. *What did Jack mean, I brought the light?*

A dry cough and a burst of fiery light broke her troubled thoughts and made her look up at the figure on Suzy's deck.

The slim figure stepped onto the gangplank and puffed on a cigarette; seconds later, they quickly stubbed it out with their heel. The figure walked gracefully down the ramp and came out of the shadows. 'Hullo, Rachel – it's about time we met,' said the woman huskily. 'I'm Polly Pickling – I believe you've been seeing my son for well over a year now?'

Rachel didn't know what to say.

'Don't worry, Rachel – I know all about Stewart's little outings,' Polly added, rubbing her hands down her filthy overalls. 'I'm not the least bit angry if that's what you're thinking,' she added and held out her hand.

Rachel shook her grubby hand. 'I met Sally today – I almost didn't recognise her,' she told her. 'I'm so glad she's finally on the mend.'

Polly glowed with pride. 'It's all thanks to Doctor Foster,' she said, brushing her sooty-stained blond fringe out of her eyes.

Footsteps clattered along the pier. 'Evening, Captain Pickling – are we ready to cast off?' asked Thomas, who gave Polly a peck on the cheek.

'It's been a long time, Thomas,' said Polly glibly. 'And you can drop the Captain, too,' she added with an affectionate smile.

Doris rushed at Polly and gave her such a hug she had to break free.

Stanley shook Polly's hand and asked, 'Have we've missed the tide?'

'The tides on the turn – but I think I can make up the time if we leave now, and if I put Suzy through her paces,' replied Polly impatiently.

'Where are you going?' Rachel asked.

'Our first port of call will be the Island of Mugnoth,' said Polly.

'Excellent,' Thomas bristled and rubbed his hands from the numbing cold. 'I've been meaning to pay the monks a visit for some time now.'

'I don't think it's a good idea you dropping in on them unannounced,' Polly told Thomas. 'I know you own the island, but it's the monks that have to live there and pay their penance.'

'I've got to make amends sooner or later,' he retorted. 'You know – let bygones be bygones and all that.'

'Remember, it was your infernal meddling that put them in jail in the first place,' Doris blustered. 'That's not easy to forgive – or forget.'

'I'll make it up to them,' Thomas offered. 'Well, enough of this idle chitchat – let's set sail before the boys in blue figure out where we are.'

'Are you coming back, Uncle Thomas?' asked Rachel sullenly.

'I don't know, Rachel,' he replied in all honesty. 'Tell Lorraine, tell her I'm off on one of my adventures – she'll know what I mean. Oh, and Gladys, look after the old man – he's been through a lot tonight.'

Gladys stepped up to Thomas. 'Don't worry, Thomas – I'll put *The Black Duke* back together again – I always have,' she smiled, giving his hands a gentle squeeze as she took his car keys.

Rachel gave Doris, Stanley and Thomas a timid wave as they boarded Suzy. Gladys drew Rachel close. Polly went to walk up the gangplank, but she hesitated, turned and rushed back down again.

'Now remember, Rachel, you're always welcome to visit us in Upper Inckome,' she sniffed, her walnut eyes welling up. 'As your parents fed Stewart – it's only fair that you should come to ours for dinner.'

'It's a date,' Rachel grinned.

'Goodbye, Gladys – take good care of her,' said Polly misty-eyed and without looking back, she sped up the gangplank, pulled it on board and rushed towards Suzy's stern.

* * *

Gladys put her arm around Rachel and gave her a comforting squeeze.

Brewing up from the north, a nasty squall whipped up and lashed the pier. They watched Suzy riding the rolling waves, but off in the distance they heard sirens above the raging wind.

Behind them, car tyres squealed to a stop; a door slammed shut and heavy footsteps thumped along the creaking pier awash with salty spray.

Rachel looked up into the pleasant face of the man who joined them. He returned her warm smile and stepped a few feet beyond. He removed his flap cap, bowed his head in reverence and prayed:

'Dear Lord, in your infinite wisdom, keep our friends and loved ones safe from the storm of storms. Do not forsake us in our hour of need and lead us away from the light that brings us so much sorrow.'

May Madeline's mercy save us from an eternity in the shadows.'

Ian Inchman put his flat cap back on his head and turned around. They all walked to Gladys' tram in silence. The squall turned tail and headed inland. Blue flashing lights barely pierced through the rising sandstorm.

'C'mon, Rachel, we better get going,' Gladys told her. 'You've had quite enough excitement for one day – and you have school tomorrow.'

'An excellent suggestion,' Ian added. 'And I have to get back, as I still have a lot more explaining to do for the powers that be.'

'You've got a lovely shiner there, Ian,' Rachel quipped. 'That should convince them you put up a good fight.'

'I'll put a cold steak on it when I get home,' he grinned.

Rachel beamed. 'Now, don't be a stranger,' she told him, and with Gladys by her side, she quickened her pace as the weather went downhill.

With the inclement weather raging even louder outside, the tram's engine struggled to start up. Rachel straddled the aft bucket seats and wiped the foggy rear window clean with her fingers. Buffeting against the wind, the tram trundled away as the lead police car skidded to a halt.

The gruff-looking old codger, with his sopping wet grey moustache, tumbled out of the passenger seat and fell flat on his face.

The sound of splitting wood mingled with the storm's wrath.

With his hands gesturing his frustration, Commissioner McDonald pushed past Ian and rushed towards the pier that was no more.

* * *

The storm clouds abated and another crisp sunny day dawned.

Bellingtons' four towers glistened as rays of sunlight filtered through the dispersing clouds. Soaked by last night's blustery storm, its heraldic flags flapped listlessly as the onshore breeze hadn't gathered strength.

Majestic swans flew away from Bellingtons' overflowing ditch, and the flying bridge that rumbled and creaked as it took the strain of the varied assortment of vehicles entering the school's overflow car park.

Tearful children with their tearful parents said their long goodbyes.

Chugging into the car park, *The Chilly Cornet* ice-cream van reversed into the last parking space. With the van's rear wheels half-submerged in a pool of muddy rainwater, Rachel leapt out of the van onto dry land and brushed the cornet crumbs off her new school uniform.

Lorraine faced her daughter with buckets of nervous apprehension. 'Now, Rachel – are you certain you've managed to pack everything in

here last night?’ Lorraine asked, helping Paul as he broke a sweat, pulling the bulging suitcase’s wobbly wheel out of a massive pothole.

‘I double-checked your list last night, Mum,’ Rachel replied.

‘You’re looking very smart this morning, Rachel,’ said Paul.

‘It’s a pity my school uniform doesn’t come in plum,’ Rachel sniffed.

‘I’m sure Bellington’s black and white uniform will grow on you,’ said Lorraine softly, but she had to admit, she had her doubts.

An irritating cracking noise echoed around the courtyard. Mrs Rose Dandelion cleared her throat and spoke into her megaphone, *‘Now, we’re running late, so would all parents say goodbye to their children. Assembly starts in half an hour – so would all pupils please make their way into the main hall, which is through the large oak doors directly behind me.’*

With dewy eyes, her parents hugged her and said their goodbyes.

Rachel waved back and made a hasty beeline towards the other pupils who were also dragging their overstuffed suitcases along the boggy path.

‘Hey, Rachel – wait up,’ said someone from behind, and she grinned back at the crowd of nattering children coming towards her.

Pulling their suitcases along the wet cobblestone pathway, Stewart, Alfred, William, George and Sophronia surrounded her with smiles.

‘We’ve just missed your parents, Rachel. We were hoping for a chocolate to start the day,’ William snorted.

‘Like you, boys need a sugar rush,’ Sophronia scoffed.

‘We better get a move on,’ said Alfred. ‘Detention on our first day of school wouldn’t look good on our school report.’

They all nodded in agreement and groaned as they pulled their heavy suitcases up the steep spiral staircase that snaked right up to the fortified iron gates. Halfway up the sandstone staircase, a couple of girls came racing up to them and helped to get their suitcases into the main hallway.

Sophronia aided Rachel and helped her to drag her suitcase into the hall, as it had lost one of its wheels in the struggle up the sheer staircase.

They all took a breather and sat down on their respected suitcases.

Sophronia, however, delved into her satchel and fanned herself with a book on poisonous plants. ‘Thanks for that,’ she wheezed, smiling at the twin girls that had helped them. ‘I owe you two,’ she added hotly.

‘Well, aren’t you going to introduce us, Sophronia?’ Alfred asked.

‘We’re the Nettlebed twins,’ beamed the redheaded girls in unison.

‘I’m Jean,’ said Jean, her flaming red hair flowing over her shoulders and down to her thin pencil waist.

‘And I’m Molly,’ said Molly who had the same coloured hair but much shorter. ‘It’s a pleasure to meet you all – and welcome to Bellingtons.’

Everyone eagerly shook hands and began talking about Bellingtons and schoolwork, but George found Rachel staring pensively at the twins. 'Hey, Rachel – come and meet our new friends,' he said enthusiastically.

Rachel edged slowly towards the twins and looked them up and down.

'What's the matter, Rachel?' George asked, as her troublesome face still gawked at the redheaded twins. 'Looks like you've seen a ghost.'

The twins exchanged glances and held out their left hands. 'So, your Professor Shire's niece,' they said harmoniously with a resounding echo.

'That's right,' Rachel replied and reluctantly shook their hands.

The twins exchanged glances once more.

'Um – are you sure we haven't met before, Rachel?' Molly asked.

'Your face seems so familiar,' added Jean.

'I think Rachel would have remembered it,' Stewart chuckled. 'Her powers of recall are legendary –'

Rose clapped her hands enthusiastically to get everyone's attention. 'All right everyone – we're still running late, so would you please follow your new headmaster, Mr Pillings, into the Assembly Hall,' she fussed.

Alice and Mary rushed down a flight of stairs, gave Rachel a quick wave and a broad smile, beckoning to George to follow them through the Assembly Hall's heavy wooden doors. Minutes later, the doors closed with a walloping whooshing thud that made the newcomers jump.

Rachel sat beside Sophronia and stared at the twins in front of her.

Sophronia tapped Rachel's arm. '*Penny for your thoughts?*' she asked.

Rachel pointed at the stage. 'Look, it's my old chemistry teacher, Mr Luddy,' she exclaimed, changing the subject, as she didn't want to talk to her about her misgivings. 'There's Sister Wiggly, and that must be Matron Crowling standing beside her with the severe smile and haircut.'

Rose tapped the microphone. 'Well, I've never seen so many pupils in this hall before, but we've just about managed to squeeze you all in,' she smiled and rattled on about Bellingtons coming to an end of an era.

Rachel went deaf when she droned on about rules and regulations.

Her troubled thoughts turned to the past, and her frown deepened as she recalled the ageing photograph she had found in Morag and Elspeth's bathroom; she thought about the giant muscular moustached man who held those twin girls aloft; she thought about Stewart's candyfloss machine and the words on the antiquated brass plaque; and finally, she thought about Jack's apparition and the ghostly girls who held him back with their scowling faces full of malice and distrust.

Rachel had no doubt those ghostly girls sat right in front of her –

Molly and Jean Nettlebed suddenly shot to their feet.

Rachel looked alarmed as they turned around and faced her, but they clapped and whooped with the rest of the hall.

Sophronia dragged Rachel to her feet and gave her a firm shove. 'Well done, Rachel – break a leg,' she smirked and gave her the thumbs up.

Rose beckoned Rachel onto the stage.

Rachel's cheeks blushed with every step, but they felt they were on fire when a young boy got up on a bench and yelled at her. Stephen, the boy she had helped to protect from the Marsh Nibbler, pointed at his arm and the large black writing on his plaster cast:

RACHEL, YOU'RE MY HERO

Halfway towards the stage, Rachel saw Alice grab the microphone and beaming, she cried, '*C'mon, Rachel – it's not every day you're made Prefect.*'

William and Alfred stumbled after Stewart, who clambered over the regimented benches and shouted, 'LET'S GIVE HER A BUNK UP!'

Eager pupils filled the aisle and pushed Rachel aloft. A couple of minutes later, and slightly overwhelmed by the rough ride, Rachel shook Rose's hand and looked completely out of sorts as she looked down at the Prefects bar badge pinned to her crisp starched lapel.

George and Alice approached Rachel with broad smiles and shook her hand, but Alice took her hand sky high and said into the microphone, '*Rachel and I want to thank every one of you for welcoming us to Bellingtons...*'

Rachel gave the excited schoolchildren an enthusiastic wave, but her flourishing smile wasn't for them.

Slowly wriggling and weaving her way through the crowd, Sophronia managed to push herself to the front of the stage, and at that moment, the girls knew they were the best of friends, recalling that blistering hot day at Bellingtons and the bump that had brought them together.